THE CHOICE

By MAURICE WEYL

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To my son Charles

for whose amusement
the story was written

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THE CHOICE

PART ONE
SUSAN
CHAPTER I

ASENATH McBRIDE, at the age of eighteen, had reached that happy stage in life's journey at which she felt entitled to consider herself no longer a child. No suspicion of the responsibility which attaches even to the beginning of maturity had yet crossed her mind. She was happy because she was healthy. Her work, that of a telephone operator, was a great delight to her even though, in speaking of it, she referred to it as a form of drudgery to which she was compelled by poverty. No, not poverty—that condition connoted something very like pauperism, dirt; everything that was undesirable.

She would have resented being called "poor," although she was given to saying it herself. But then, she said it with a deprecating little smile which took all of the humility out of the statement and left the hearer to understand that the McBrides were really very superior people whose circumstances, unfortunately, did not permit of certain luxuries which rich people enjoyed or rather submitted to because they really did not know what to do with their money.

Asenath's father was a foreman in a packing-box fac-

tory. A worthy man if ever there was one. His views of life were casehardened. A stern Presbyterian, he had no doubts as to what was right and what was wrong. He used the Bible as the final guide, accepting its word, in English, of course, as the definite pronouncement of the Almighty. He never hesitated a single moment in deciding the meaning of any injunction as an explicit confirmation of any of his own prejudices. It was not so much that he agreed with the Bible as that the Bible invariably agreed with him.

Especially did the injunction as to the spoiling of children by sparing the rod, and others emphasizing the authority of the husband, appeal to him. Asenath's childhood had been spent in fear of him, a fear built upon actual application of the rod.

Asenath's mother likewise held her husband in awe. In her case, she was a completely colorless person; her dependence upon McBride for guidance in all things made her life an extremely easy one, that is, mentally. She never had to think about anything except the affairs of her household and her dress. She took her life for granted and was quite content to accept her husband's opinions as completely final.

For Asenath, she was a mere servant in every way except in matters which involved action contrary to the rules of life laid down by the master of the household. A skillful needlewoman, utterly devoid of taste in dress, she was able, under Asenath's instructions, to make

beautiful clothes for her. For Asenath knew how to dress. She bought fashion magazines and was at no loss to select the styles which were in vogue and, at the same time, suited to her figure and coloring.

She feared her father and admired him in a way. Not warmly, for his aloofness, due to his constant assumption of superior virtue, made any affectionate regard impossible. For her mother she entertained about the quality of liking that would ordinarily be awakened by a good cow, one who produced a regular amount of excellent milk. She told her mother everything that came into her head when they were together, not because she wanted her mother to know what she told her, but because she wanted to tell somebody.

Mrs. McBride was utterly commonplace. She had never been anything but diffident, and any lack of self-confidence which may have marked her when she first married was confirmed and increased by her husband's complete self-sufficiency. In the early days of their marriage, she once ventured an opinion on some small matter, probably having been encouraged thereto by some caress, but only once. On that occasion, McBride's contempt was so evident and so painful that a repetition of the experience was not to be thought of.

But this distinctly negative quality of Mrs. McBride was as potent a factor in the formation of Asenath's character as the sternness of her father. Where the self-effacement of her mother gave her assurance and confi-

dence in herself, the aloofness and austerity of her father gave her a wholesome respect for authority.

Of course, Asenath's character, like nearly everybody's, was mostly born in her. The elements were hers, but their growth in the direction in which they finally were led was the result of her narrow life as a child and an adolescent, and her later experiences in a world which to her seemed very, very wide. Perhaps it really was.

Card playing, dancing, the theatre were all anathema in the McBride household. The chief joy of life was church-going. Twice on every Sunday, Mr. McBride and Asenath went to the Second Presbyterian Church to attend services. Mrs. McBride went at least once every Sunday and all three of them went to the Wednesday evening prayer meeting. In addition, Asenath attended Sunday School, and the whole family was present on every other occasion for church activity, suppers, concerts, and so on.

The views of the senior McBrides on their relation to religion undoubtedly offer a fertile field for interesting speculation, but we shall not consider them. What interests us is Asenath; not merely her views of the church and religion generally, but rather the effect of this constant association with church-going people in her early youth upon her attitude towards life as she grew older, and the results of this attitude as shown in her actions.

Some of the incidents in her life are pressing for a

place in this chronicle and it will not do to delay their appearance much longer. It will be better, however, to finish with the mention of certain facts of her childhood which were potent factors in the formation of her views of life, before actually beginning with the story.

Strange to say, Asenath's constant attendance at church and Sunday School was without effect in making her either devout or skeptical. She went as a pure matter of course. The sermons she heard never reached her brain and her Sunday School lessons were learned only with her lips. The sole interest which she found in church-going was social. She formed a few acquaintances there, principally girls of about her own age. The boys interested her very slightly.

This may have been due to the fact that she was not permitted to go out in the evenings, nor was she allowed to have boys call on her. Once, when she was about fifteen, a boy walked home with her from Sunday School and would have come into the house with her had it not been that McBride opened the door for them and literally prevented the boy's entrance.

When Asenath was safely inside the house, her father told her in no uncertain terms that he considered her too young to associate with boys. Later, when she discussed the matter with her mother, she received explicit instructions on the subject. Asenath offered no protest whatever. She was really not much interested.

She formed comparatively few acquaintances at

school. Her father's strict instructions compelled her to come home immediately the session was over. Consequently, she had small opportunity to form friendships.

If her religious education was not accomplished by her constant attendance at church and Sunday School, her secular education was not much furthered by the public school. Of course, she learned to read and write and she acquired a slight acquaintance with arithmetic. What she learned in other subjects never remained in her mind after she had passed an examination. She learned, not from interest, but by necessity. The necessity once past, the matter dropped from her.

The only book which was ever read in the McBride household was the Bible. Strictly speaking, even that was not read, that is, used as literature. Its perusal, one chapter at a time, was a work of duty. It was just like their saying grace before meals, a matter of habit. They did not really feel the gratitude to the Almighty which they expressed. If they had ever thought about it at all, they might possibly have been compelled to admit that the act was one of propitiation solely.

But they did not think. Instead, they just read the Bible regularly and said grace each day just as mechanically as they ate their meals.

The newspaper was the one piece of literature which illumined the family life. Both of Asenath's parents read it. McBride read the headlines of the really important news, occasionally reading the article under some head-

line which interested him; but what gave him most pleasure was the local news, the stories about people with whose names he was familiar. He also read the church news.

Mrs. McBride never could wait for the morning paper. Naturally, she arose earlier than her husband, as she had his breakfast to prepare. But McBride's breakfast never received any attention until she had meticulously scrutinized the list of deaths. It was inevitable, with her extremely limited number of acquaintances, that she was rarely rewarded by reading the notice of the death of anyone whom she knew or even had heard of. But she persevered, hoping always.

Asenath never read the newspaper. She never read anything for pleasure. She was compelled to do some little reading in her school work, but she never had the opportunity to learn whether or not she had any taste for it.

She was a quiet child. She played with dolls in a demure, silent way. She rarely spoke to the doll, so it was impossible for anyone to determine how much illusion there was for her in her play. As she grew older, she helped in the work of the household to some extent, and then, later, she took the position in the telephone exchange.

What did interest her was her dress, her appearance. Nearly all of her thought was centered on this one subject. Not through coquetry of any sort, because, up to her eighteenth year at least, she was innocent of all

forms of it, whether consciously or unconsciously. She was extremely fastidious in every respect. No detail of her toilet was glossed over. Both her person and her attire were immaculate. And her care for her person rested upon the most solid of foundations.

For Asenath was beautiful; not merely pretty, with the charm which always attaches to youth. Her beauty was of a more enduring quality, one which reaches its full flowering with maturity.

No combination of words can describe any human face. To say that her skin was wonderfully clear and fair gives one idea; to say that her waving hair was a deep, rich red gives another. Some impression of her slenderness may be communicated by words, as is also true of her height, which was slightly above medium; of her tapering hands, of her narrow, aristocratic foot.

But these are mere details whose interrelation it is impossible to visualize and, therefore, as description, they are almost worthless. Fortunately, in Asenath's case, it is possible to set forth a nearly perfect picture. For Asenath resembled the well-known portrait of Madame Vigée le Brun, that in which she has her child in her arms. She had the same fine delicacy of feature, the same lovely harmony of form.

Her gray eyes expressed candor, sincerity, spirituality. Whether these characters were hers in actuality as well as in the look she gave to the world, a study of her proximate adventures may disclose.

CHAPTER II

ASENATH liked her work from the very beginning. She was fascinated by the mystery of the telephone exchange, a fascination which happily remained. She had no difficulty in mastering her work, for she was neither nervous nor self-conscious. In addition, she had a high co-ordination which made any muscular activity easy.

But, more than by the work itself was she interested in the girls with whom she became acquainted in the exchange. They were drawn from the whole world. They represented ideas and training which until then were utterly foreign to her. It was very different from her friends in the church. They were all more or less of the same drab, uninteresting type. Those of them who had individuality kept it for use elsewhere, and the rest of them were just as significant intellectually as Asenath herself.

There was one girl in particular in the exchange who attracted Asenath from the very beginning. Naturally, she was of the type almost exactly opposite. She was bright, vivacious, nervously quick in all of her actions. She was short, dark, rather inclined towards plumpness. She would have been rather homely had not the liveliness of her expression lent her face charm.

It was at the lunch hour that they had their first talk. Susan Collins, that was her name, had been struck with

Asenath's beauty and, being one of those of her sex who are subject to this appeal, she determined to become acquainted. At the lunch hour this was easy. She simply followed Asenath and took a seat next to her.

"How do you like it here?" she began.

"Very much," answered Asenath.

"Ever work before?"

"No," said Asenath. She would have been glad to add something more, but she could not think of anything to say.

"My name's Susan Collins," said that young lady after a short pause. "What's yours?"

"McBride," answered Asenath.

"Just McBride?" queried the other.

"No; Asenath."

"Asenath! That's an odd name. I've never heard it. Is it French?"

"I don't know. It's out of the Bible."

"Oh!" questioningly. "What part?"

"Asenath was Joseph's wife."

"Which Joseph?"

"The Joseph in the Old Testament."

The conversation lagged for a moment. Asenath would have liked to continue it but knew not how. Susan was readier. She began again.

"That's a sweet waist you've got on. Where did you buy it?"

"My mother made it."

"Oh! Did she? Where'd she get the pattern?"

"Out of the Delineator."

"Did she make your skirt, too?"

"Yes."

"I wish my mother could make things like that for me. But she ain't got the time. There's four kids at home, I'm the oldest, and she's got her hands full."

Asenath did not answer. She was enjoying the companionship of Susan intensely. She wondered how it could be possible for an utter stranger to find so much to talk about. She did not resent being questioned. In fact, she was not conscious that she was being catechised. She wondered whether she might venture to say something about the Collins family, she didn't know quite what. While she was silently thinking over this problem, her face wore a smile which betokened her interest in her questioner, as well as a real liking for her.

Susan waited only a little while for Asenath to say something and then went on to ask:

"How many are there in your family?"

"Just papa, mamma and me."

"No wonder your mother can make your clothes. Do you have to work?"

"Yes—no—I don't know what you mean."

"I mean do your folks need the money."

"I don't know, I give mamma my wages."

"What's your father do? Has he a business?"

"No. He's a foreman in Harrison & Magee's."

"Where do you live?"

"On Bancroft Street near Porter."

"Oh! That's a lovely neighborhood. Your folks must be rich."

"Oh no, we ain't; we're poor, of course not awful poor, but, you know—"

The conversation paused. Susan was very much impressed with her companion. She was not conscious, on her part, of the fact that the whole talk thus far had been like taking testimony on the witness stand. The closer she came to Asenath, the more beautiful she found her. She could not have explained the reasons for her great interest, but she felt it. After a short monologue, treating of their lunch and the lunch room, she again became personal. She said:

"You're awful pretty."

Asenath was delighted and uncomfortable at the same time. She felt it incumbent upon her to make some sort of disclaimer.

"Oh! no, I'm not," was the best she could do; "there's lots of girls here who are much prettier."

"Rats," said Susan, "there ain't one in your class. What does HE say about it?"

"He?"

"Yes; 'He,' you know what I mean?"

"No, I don't."

"Ain't you got a fella?"

"No."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"How's that? Don't you like fellas?"

"I don't know any."

"How's that?"

"Papa never let me go with any boys. He said I was too young."

"But you ain't too young now, are you?"

"I guess not, but I don't know any except some boys who go to our church."

"What's the matter with them?"

"Oh! I don't know. I don't like 'em."

"Do you ever talk to 'em?"

"No."

"I know a boy, he's a dandy fella; you'd be just crazy about him and he's the kind that'd just fall for you. His name's Tom Holland. He works down at the big saw works, you know. He's awful liberal. If you go out with him, you're sure to have a good time. He's no piker. And funny! I just kill myself laughing at him. He always goes with Bill Purton, they're chums; you never saw two fellas that was as thick as they are. Bill's my fella. I'd love you to meet them. My goodness, it's one o'clock already. Back to the mines."

She got up and left. Asenath followed her. She had never enjoyed herself more. Susan's breeziness, her volubility were charming. She looked forward to their next meeting with desire. This was life indeed.

At her work during the whole afternoon, the undercurrent of her mind carried the memory of this most delightful adventure. For to Asenath this meeting was an adventure. Dimly she felt that it was the beginning of a new life, a life in which joy should have the master-role. It seemed to her that she had now finally put off childhood and had really become what she herself would have called "a young lady."

These were not definite, clean-cut impressions, but vague incidents of her sense of joy, her feeling of freedom of emancipation from the yoke of her parents' authority. It was not that she had ever been in active rebellion against their decrees. On the contrary, she had been quite content to accept their rulings because her imagination did not carry her beyond them.

She had not even chosen her position with the Telephone Company. That was her father's choice. McBride's most intimate friend had a daughter so employed and his recommendation was so strong that Asenath was simply told to apply for the position. McBride felt that she would be sheltered, saved from contact with the mixture of sexes common to most business offices. Asenath made her application, was easily able to meet the requirements, as has already been told, and was promptly given what was considered a desirable position for a beginner.

That evening as she helped her mother with the dishes, she interrupted the placid flow of that lady's account of the day's events by asking this startling question:

"Mamma, ain't I old enough to have company?"

"What kind of company?" inquired Mrs. McBride, with a reasonable show of caution.

"Boys," answered Asenath.

"What boys?" asked her mother, still on caution bent.

"Oh! No boys in particular. You know I don't know any boys except them that come to Sunday School and they make me sick."

"Well, if you don't know any boys to have for company, what makes you ask about it?"

"I was just thinking about it. Suppose I should get an introduction to some nice fella. I'd feel awful cheap if I couldn't ask him to call."

"That's so," assented her mother thoughtfully. "I'll speak to your father about it."

Asenath did not press the matter further at that time. Although it was of the greatest possible moment to her, it did not prey on her mind. She was never ardent in any pursuit. As much as anything in the world, at that moment, did she desire her parents' recognition of the fact that she was grown up, and she felt that there could be no surer indication of it than the grant of liberty to receive callers of the other sex. Having broached the subject to her mother, and having that lady's promise to discuss it with her husband, Asenath was entirely content to await further developments. And this waiting was unaccompanied by any thought of future action based on either a favorable or an unfavorable reception

of her petition. It was simply set aside until further developments should call for renewed attention.

Mrs. McBride spoke to her husband on the subject that night and, in the morning, communicated the result to Asenath.

"Your father says it'll be all right for you to have boys come to see you, only they must be somebody he knows."

Asenath was taken aback. She felt that she was "grown up" and entitled to choose for herself. This did not seem fair.

"But, mamma," she said, "suppose I get an introduction to a boy who's all right and papa don't know him; what good does it do?"

"That's so," answered Mrs. McBride. She was perplexed. There seemed to be something not quite right about the matter as it stood, but she was unable to see just what it was. In speaking with her husband, his presentation of the case had seemed perfectly clear and convincing.

"I can't invite him," Asenath went on, "and if he can't come here, how is papa going to find out if he's all right?"

"I don't know."

"I couldn't tell him I'd like to have him come only my father won't let me ask him because he don't know him, could I?"

"No, I guess not," answered Mrs. McBride, doubt-

fully. And then she was seized with an inspiration. "Assy," she said, "what's the use bothering about this? You don't know anyone you want to invite, so you might as well wait until you do." She delivered herself of this with an air of finality which betokened her complete satisfaction with her solution of the problem.

But Asenath was not satisfied. What she wanted was a recognition of her right as a "grown-up" to cast off the parental leading strings. She did not know just what answer to make to her mother. It did not occur to her that the fact that she was at work and was contributing her pay to the family exchequer might give her some right to a voice in her own affairs. She had a somewhat vague sense that she was being treated unjustly, but no words came to her to formulate it. So she let the matter drop out of their present conversation.

CHAPTER III

THE friendship between Asenath and Susan ripened with extraordinary rapidity. They were together every day at lunch, and, in a few days, Susan was acquainted with every detail of Asenath's life for which her imagination had found questions. Asenath had answered every one of them with perfect candor, so much pleased with the intimacy of their companionship that reserve of any kind never occurred to her. Asenath had never before had a real friend, or what she thought was a real friend, which, after all, amounts to the same thing.

It never occurred to her to ask Susan any questions of either a personal or a general nature. In the first place, her curiosity was not sufficiently specific, and in the second, it was not necessary. Susan was not at all reticent. She told of her life with the same freedom that she displayed in questioning Asenath. And so, without any effort, Asenath learned much about the Collins family, which she found interesting in a general way, and a great deal more concerning Susan's relations with the other sex, which she found absorbing in the highest degree. Susan, it may be observed, did not consider herself to be subject to strict accuracy in her accounts, whether they dealt with family life or her "fellas." With regard to the latter, she was careful to suppress certain

details which she felt might produce some unnecessary shock to the sensibilities of so unsophisticated a person as Asenath.

Susan had not shown much surprise when she learned that Asenath was not permitted to receive young men as callers unless they were acquaintances of McBride. She did not receive callers herself. In the first place, the Collins household was not an ideal place for a young lady to receive them, and, in the second, Susan's friends generally met her by appointment outside. Her social standards were not difficult in this respect.

For some reason or other Susan held Asenath somewhat in awe. While she would never have admitted it to anyone, in her own mind she felt that Asenath was her superior in the social scale. She represented a certain amount of family solidarity and family pride which Susan felt rather than imagined. Susan's family "camped out" in the World. There was no strong tie binding its members.

Asenath completely charmed Susan. She was attracted by her beauty to begin with, and interested also by a certain evasive quality in Asenath which persisted in spite of her seeming utter frankness in answering all of Susan's pointed questions. No matter what effort Susan made to learn all about her new friend, there seemed always something more which no questioning would bring out.

Her admiration of Asenath made her anxious to have

some of her friends meet her. She wanted the satisfaction that the confirmation of her preference would bring and the further satisfaction that she would have in introducing a girl to them whom they would describe as a "real queen." This title for Asenath, by the way, had occurred to Susan almost at once, and she had promptly called her "Queenie" and always so addressed her.

Without disclosing her intention to Asenath, Susan had arranged with Tom Holland to have him await their departure from the telephone exchange one evening shortly after their acquaintance first began.

It had been a mild spring day, just warm enough to bring assurance that winter was really past. And now, in the twilight, there was still a balmy quality in the breeze, although, with the approach of dusk, it had become much cooler.

Asenath and Susan had walked only half a block when the latter espied Tom Holland standing at the corner of the next street.

"Why! There's Tom Holland," she said with an air of surprise.

Asenath looked up and perceived a young man of about twenty-one or two. She did not notice that he was rather an unhealthy looking specimen, somewhat pimply, with weak, characterless features. She did not take account of his colorless hair, his cheap clothes, which bore the unmistakable stamp of the flashy ready-made variety, in their extravagant attempt at modish-

ness. She saw only the Tom Holland of Susan's description, the dashing cavalier, generous with purse and entertainment, the humorist, the "dandy fella."

As they approached him, he turned towards them, a smile of recognition on his face.

"Hello, Kid," he said, addressing Susan.

"Hello, Tom," she answered as they came up. "Meet my friend, Miss McBride."

"Happy to meet you," said Tom. Asenath did not say anything, but smiled sweetly and held out her hand.

"Where are you going?" asked Susan, keeping up the pretense of an accidental meeting. Actually, what she said sounded like "we'ere-ye-goin," but, since an attempt to spell the sounds she made phonetically would cause great difficulty in reading her remarks, we shall write instead the words that she supposed she was uttering. We shall follow the same course with the speeches of the others.

"Nowhere in particular," answered Tom. "I'll walk along with you, if you don't mind."

"Surest thing you know," said Susan to him, and then turning to Asenath, "How about it, Queenie?"

"All right," said Asenath, "but I'm only going two blocks further. I take the car there, you know."

"You mean your motor, don't you?" asked Tom.

Susan laughed in appreciation of his humor, but Asenath said:

"No, the trolley."

Tom was not sure whether or not Asenath was putting the joke on him. He concluded promptly that she was and said:

"You're a pretty good little kidder yourself, ain't you?"

Asenath smiled demurely. No one had ever said anything like this to her before, so she made no other acknowledgment of what was obviously intended as a compliment.

"I guess you don't care for dancing," hazarded Tom.

"I love it," answered Asenath, "but I don't know much about it yet. I've only tried it a couple of times."

Susan had been teaching her some steps at lunch time and had found her an extraordinarily apt pupil.

"How'd you like to go out with me some evening this week and try it?"

"I'd love to," answered Asenath, "but I don't know if I could get permission."

Susan broke in here, "Don't go rushing her, Tom. Wait until I've been up to her house. I'll fix it with her dad. Won't I, Queenie?"

"I hope so," answered Asenath. "Oh! There's my car. Good-bye," and away she ran.

"What do you think of her?" Susan asked.

"She's some kid. She's a peacherino," answered Tom. "She's a winner. Gee! but she's got style."

"Yes, and don't you get fresh with her, either. She ain't that kind. She's a lovely girl, the kind it does you

good to know. She don't say much, but she thinks a lot. You can learn good manners from her."

"Oh! I don't know," said Tom in a tone evidencing complete self-satisfaction. He was not noted for humility. He was in no doubt whatever as to his qualifications as a squire of dames. At twenty-one or two, one is apt not to underestimate one's attractions for the fair. He did not enjoy even the slight tinge of criticism which was implied in Susan's remark and his manner showed it.

"Now, don't get sore," said Susan, "you ain't such a much. There are others. When did you see Bill last?"

"This morning," answered Tom. "He's got to work tonight."

"Honest? That's the third time in a week. He'd better get another job. Well, so long, here's my car." And she left him.

Asenath believed that she admired Tom Holland. Certainly she had enjoyed the few minutes she had spent in his company and she looked forward to meeting him again with more interest than she had ever had in anything which had come into her life. She was much impressed by his evident admiration and found it very sweet. Vaguely, she wondered how Susan was going to secure permission for her to go out in the evening, but no solution of the problem came to her. She had, however, no doubt as to Susan's ability to do anything. She rated Susan on the basis of that young woman's ready

professions. She had never met anyone who was so voluble. She would have pronounced Susan brilliant if she had known the word in this connection.

Susan's scheme was simplicity itself and did great credit to her perspicacity.

The very next evening Susan, on her own invitation, went home to supper with Asenath. Mrs. McBride welcomed her and the head of the family suffered her in silence until the first edge of his fine appetite was worn off. Then he asked:

"What church do you attend?"

"Why, Mr. McBride, I'm ashamed to tell you that we don't go to any." Susan acted her shame well. It was overdone in no particular.

"Do you mean that none of you ever go to church at all?" asked Mr. McBride, sternly.

"No; not altogether," answered Susan. "Mother has gone once or twice since I've been old enough to take notice. She'd go all right, but my father won't let her. I'd love to go; I don't think it's right to grow up without any religion. I *would* go, too, but I don't know where to go. I'd feel strange going into a church where I didn't know anybody."

Mr. McBride was much interested. Here was good work ready for his hand.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Sue—Susan," she answered. "Susan Collins."

"Well, Susan, how would you like to come to our

church—the Second Presbyterian, Halstead and Prince Streets."

"Oh! I'd love to."

"Well, come Sunday, day after tomorrow. You be here at half-past ten and go with us."

And so it was arranged and so was it carried out. Susan was on hand promptly. She walked to church with McBride and Asenath. McBride improved the occasion to air his views. He was stimulated to extraordinary efforts by the evident sympathy and appreciation of his listener. Susan's attention to the services and her demeanor throughout the morning completely won him. He asked her, nay, insisted that she go home to dinner with them and return to Sunday School in the afternoon with Asenath. Susan accepted with a show of reluctance she was far from feeling. Actually she was enjoying herself immensely—not her attendance at church and Sunday School on account of any great interest in either, but she enjoyed the evident success of her acting.

At the dinner table it was an easy matter for Susan to obtain McBride's consent for a visit from Asenath to Susan's house. He was so much pleased with his success in "rescuing a brand from the burning" that he would actually have trusted his convert with anything.

CHAPTER IV

SUSAN did not make a definite appointment for Asenath's visit to her at the time that the permission was granted. She did not want to appear to have any ulterior motive in her association with the McBride family. She wanted, besides, to make so sure of McBride's confidence in her that he would not be ready to believe anyone who might be moved to say something in her disfavor. And then, she actually enjoyed her conquest of McBride, in which there was not a little coquetry. After all, he was a man and therefore to be won.

On Wednesday evening and again on Sunday she appeared at church. Her tact won for her much favorable notice, and quite a number of the regular attendants made her acquaintance and liked her. Although she did not lose sight of her original object, she began to feel the great social advantage the church offered and found herself looking forward with pleasure to becoming a regular attendant.

On the second Tuesday after her first visit to McBride's, Asenath was to go to Collins' for the evening meal. At least, that was what had been announced, and was what Asenath believed. It was understood that she was to be home early. Susan had not told her anything more than she expected they would see Tom and Bill, with which

information Asenath was much pleased. She did not tell her mother of this aspect of the evening's entertainment, because she knew she would discuss it with her husband and she could not determine whether he might not offer objections. But it was only for a moment that she even considered mentioning it to her mother. It opened up too many possibilities and would have called for an amount of contemplation which Asenath would have found tedious. It was ever so much more comfortable to let things happen than to think about them.

Directly after she and Susan had left the telephone exchange on Tuesday evening, they met the two boys. William Purton was a rather heavy, serious-looking young man of about twenty-two. He was quite the opposite of his friend Holland in appearance. He looked to be more nearly mature. There was no suggestion of speed in any part of his visible make-up. He acknowledged his introduction to Asenath with a friendly nod, while, on her part, a smile and an outstretched hand completed the ceremony.

The quartet promptly broke up into pairs, Tom and Asenath in the lead, and walked down the street. At the first crossing, Tom said:

"What do you say to taking in a 'movie' until supper?"

"All right," answered Asenath.

They waited for the others to come up. Tom made the proposal to them also and it was immediately accepted.

The picture they saw told a highly improbable story,

one in which the very special morality of the scenario was strongly emphasized, a morality Jesuitical in the extreme, in its constant approval of any means which might procure the desired end. But to Asenath, who had seen very little of moving pictures, had read no books, and whose actual experiences of life were limited both by circumstance and the quality of her imagination, the story was real and the illusion complete. She was so fascinated, so thoroughly held by the picture that she was scarcely aware that Tom had taken hold of her hand. A sudden break in the film, with its shock of surprise, brought it fully into her consciousness and then, before she had a chance to act with purpose, she withdrew it from his clasp sharply.

No sooner had she done so than she was sorry. She found that she liked to have him hold her hand. But, even in the face of this discovery, Asenath was so constituted that she could not make a new beginning in this or, in fact, any other direction. As for Tom, he was sure that the sudden withdrawal meant displeasure on Asenath's part and, in her presence, for some reason which he could not explain, his ordinary assurance was much less than usual.

They sat through the picture without any further advances from Tom. Occasionally he would whisper some remark, intended to be facetious, concerning the characters and incidents on the screen, but Asenath scarcely heard him.

When the hero and heroine of the picture, locked in a close embrace, finally faded from sight, the quartet left the theatre. In the street, there was a short discussion as to where they would eat, and it was then, for the first time, that Asenath learned that they were not to eat at Collins'. The idea of going to a restaurant delighted her, for her experience of them was practically nil, and her pleasure was in no way diminished when she learned that the choice finally rested on a cheap lunch place in which various kinds of griddle-cakes appeared to be of the greatest importance in the menu, a conclusion based upon the fact that they were cooked in the show window by a man attired in spotless white.

The choice having been made, the party again broke up into couples and walked down the street. Asenath was with Tom. Conversation began immediately. Tom said:

"Wasn't that fellow a nut to let himself get all tied up like that? If he'd a thought for a minute, he'd a been on to the villain's game."

"Yes," said Asenath, but she did not agree with him. To her the hero of the story was simply perfect.

"Well, I ain't crazy about those kind of pictures, anyway. I like Charlie Chaplin, don't you?"

"No, I don't," answered Asenath, firmly.

"Honest? Why, I kill myself laughing at Charlie. Why don't you like him?"

"Oh! He acts so crazy."

"But don't you think he's a scream? Don't you laugh at him?"

"Of course, I laugh at him; you can't help it, he's so simple. But I don't like him."

"I can't see that. Don't you like to laugh?"

This was a hard question, much more difficult than either of them imagined.

"Yes, I like to laugh," said Asenath after a brief pause, "but I don't like Charlie Chaplin."

They had reached the restaurant by this time and Asenath was saved from the necessity of explaining the inconsistency of her last remark.

They were very jolly during the meal, that is, all but Asenath. She did not participate in the good natured banter which formed their table talk. Even though she made no contribution to the general gaiety, she enjoyed herself thoroughly and joined in their good humored laughter rather through sympathy than because of her understanding of their sallies. Much of their talk concerned matters entirely outside of her experience. Once, when Tom ventured a little beyond the bounds of strict decency in one of his allusions, Susan cut him short with a meaning look. Her caution, however, was quite unnecessary, for it was all going quite over Asenath's head.

After supper, dancing was proposed and it was suggested that they go to McGoverns', where Tom said they could have a private room with a Victrola and do just what they liked. This was perfectly satisfactory to

Asenath, who was utterly without any standards to guide her.

They left the restaurant and walked a few blocks to McGoverns'.

This proved to be a large saloon with a number of private rooms on the second floor. They chose a room of fair size which contained a Victrola, moved the table from the centre of the room, and, in response to the waiter's inquiry as to what they would have to drink, entered into a discussion of this question. The two boys promptly decided for high-balls and Susan chose a dry Martini. Asenath made no choice at all.

"What would you like, Queenie?" asked Susan.

"I don't know what to take," answered Asenath. "Oh! Yes, I like Sarsaparilla." She called it Sassaparella.

"Oh! You don't want that stuff," said Susan. "Order a Bronx."

"What's a 'Bronx'?" asked Asenath.

"It's a cocktail," answered Susan.

Asenath had heard of cocktails but had no clear idea of what they might be. Her knowledge of intoxicating drinks was, naturally, extremely limited. She knew that beer, whisky, wine and rum were such things, particularly rum. She had seen drunken men and women and knew in a vague way how they became so, but the whole matter was so far removed from her own life that it possessed no interest or curiosity for her. None of the names of the drinks ordered by the others was familiar

to her and, therefore, she had no idea of what they might be or indeed that they were in the classification of strong drink.

So, when she heard Susan's unenlightening definition of a Bronx, she nodded her acquiescence, and the waiter departed. She was in a state of complete contentment and was ready to accept anything which seemed to form part of the evening's entertainment.

The Victrola was put into action and they danced. Tom found that Asenath had indeed profited by her practice with Susan. She danced as naturally as she breathed. He was delighted and she tasted joy such as she had never known.

When Asenath put the cocktail to her lips, she was not sure that its taste was agreeable. A second sip proved to be more palatable and the third was distinctly pleasant. She was thirsty and felt much refreshed when she had drunk all of it. She wanted to dance again, and the others were quite willing.

They put on another record and began again. And then another. After this, Asenath suggested that they dance again immediately.

"Oh! Let's rest a bit," said Susan.

"Tom," said Asenath, addressing him by name for the first time, "let's you and I dance then." She was conscious of something new in her, a quality of initiative, a recklessness she had never known. She was deliriously happy. Everything was blotted out of her mind save

only her present joy. She, the most undemonstrative person imaginable, wanted to sing. And she did hum the tune as they danced together. Tom was clasping her very closely. He held the fingers of her right hand gripped tightly, and Asenath returned the pressure without knowing it.

And then she felt herself becoming dizzy. She closed her eyes and the whole room seemed to be turning about her. She felt that she would have fallen were it not for the support of Tom's arms.

When they stopped dancing, Tom led her to a window. He stood with his arm about her waist, her head resting on his shoulder. She began to feel sick; a sensation of nausea was coming over her which she struggled to master. And, just then Tom made a movement.

She knew instantly that he was going to kiss her, and she wanted him to do it. He took his arm from her waist and, holding her face in both of his hands, brought it towards his slowly.

And then, a sudden violent wave of nausea overwhelmed her. She felt that in one instant more she would be unable to control herself, and, breaking from him, she ran away, out of the room, down the stairs, up the brilliantly illuminated street until she came to a dark alley.

When Asenath had recovered her physical equilibrium, she was overcome by a fearful sense of shame. She felt that she was forever disgraced in the eyes of her

companions. She was sure that they would not wish to have anything more to do with her. It was impossible for her to blame them for their attitude, or what she believed must be their attitude.

If she had attempted to state precisely just what she had done to incur their displeasure, she would have found it impossible. But no clear-cut statement would have been one iota more convincing than the emotion which mastered her.

For one brief moment she entertained the idea of rejoining her companions. But it was only for a moment. She felt that she would have to make some explanation, and that she could not do. She did not know what to explain. It certainly would never do just to say that she had felt sick and had run away because she could not think of anything else to do. That would be too babyish, quite unsuited to what she looked upon as the complete maturity of Susan and the two boys. At any rate, they were probably glad, now, that she had so soon shown her unfitness to associate with them.

Well, there was nothing to be done but to go home. Susan would undoubtedly bring the light jacket, which Asenath had left behind her in her flight, to the telephone exchange the next morning. Asenath had no need of its protection, for the evening was quite mild; it was the latter part of May, and going through the streets without it would not attract any attention. Still, she did not care to get into a car and, therefore, walked home.

As she walked, she tried to decide upon the form that her apology to Susan would take if, indeed, her friend would listen to her at all. No more difficult problem had ever presented itself to Asenath and, try as she would, no suitable solution offered itself.

CHAPTER V

WHEN Asenath made her sudden break from Susan and the two boys, the whole trio were too much surprised to make any immediate comment.

Tom was the first to find speech. He said:

"Well, I call that pretty raw."

Susan was up in arms at once. She was furious.

"Raw!" she almost shouted. "Raw! If there's anybody that's raw, it's you, Tom Holland. It just serves me right. Introducing a lady like Queenie to a bum like you. Yes, bum, that's what you are. You've got no more idea of how to act with a lady than I don't know what. I told you not to rush her, but, you poor fish, you think that every girl's just ready to fall for you and so you behave just as though you'd picked her off the street."

She paused for breath, and taking advantage of the opportunity, Purton began:

"Say, Sue, it ain't all Tom's fault. Didn't she—"

But he got no further. Susan interrupted him with renewed fury.

"That's right. Stick up for him. I guess you're no better than he is. I'm done with you. Both of you. Don't you ever dare to talk to me again. If I see you on the street, I won't know you. You can both go to Hell, for all I care."

And Susan picked up both her own and Asenath's jacket and strode out of the room.

She took a car for McBride's house and, naturally, arrived there before Asenath. She rang the bell three times without effect, and then, judging correctly that both Mr. and Mrs. McBride may have gone out for a short while, she sat on the step and waited.

She was calmer now and in no doubt as to what she would say to Asenath, providing, of course, that she would be willing to listen to her. She hoped that in some way she could repair the breach that she felt had undoubtedly been made in their friendship. She was sure that she had done a very wrong thing in introducing a girl of Asenath's refinement and intelligence to a boy like Tom Holland, about whose ideas with regard to what he slangily designated as "skirts" Susan had no illusions. She felt that her real intention had been one of kindness. She had only wished to show Asenath a little bit of fun and had imagined that Tom would have appreciated the difference between Asenath and the girls with whom he ordinarily consorted, and not transcend the limits of decent behavior.

Susan learned in those moments of doubt as to the continuance of her friendship with Asenath just how much that friendship meant to her. She could not have explained it, but she knew that she wanted this above all things.

While she was turning this matter over in her mind

for perhaps the twentieth time, she saw Asenath coming slowly up the street. Asenath saw her at the same moment and would have hurried towards her, but she was utterly unprepared for the meeting. It was so completely unexpected that she was as near panic as she had ever been. She felt that she must say something in explanation of her flight and she had been unable to think of anything satisfactory.

But with Susan it was quite different. She jumped up from the step and ran toward Asenath.

"Oh! Queenie!" she cried, "I'm so sorry. I had no idea that Tom Holland would act so raw. I just stayed one minute after you left, and then I gave him an earful. Him and Bill, too. I'm done with them for keeps. I ought to have known better than to introduce you to a couple of fellas like them. They're not your kind and they ain't going to be my kind after this. I've told them they're cut out by me for good and all. Oh! Queenie, will you ever forgive me?" And Susan looked anxiously at her friend for some sign that her plea had been favorably received.

Asenath was nonplused. She simply could not understand. It would appear from what Susan had said that she had done nothing to estrange Susan. On the contrary it was she who was begging Asenath's pardon.

She could not concur in Susan's condemnation of the two boys. To Asenath they had seemed very nice and it was with a pang of regret that she recognized that

the turn affairs had taken would rob her of the opportunity for further meetings. She did not know what to say, try as she would to find something. So she walked along with Susan to the house without answering.

Susan was a bit disconcerted by Asenath's silence, taking it as an indication that her friend's feelings had been too deeply wounded to permit of instant forgiveness. She waited for a little while and then could hold her peace no longer.

"You're not really mad at me, are you, Queenie?" she asked.

"Why, no," answered Asenath. "I was only thinking."

"Thinking about what?" asked Susan.

"Oh! Just thinking. You brought my coat, didn't you?"

There was no mistaking the friendliness of the tone. Susan was delighted.

"Yes, here it is."

They had reached the door of the McBride house by this time.

"I rang the bell three times," said Susan, "but nobody answered."

"Oh! I guess mamma went over to Aunt Emma's and this is papa's lodge night. Mamma will likely be back soon."

"Would you like me to wait until she comes home?"

"Yes," said Asenath, "or we could go over to Aunt Emma's. She lives 'round the corner."

Just then they espied Mrs. McBride turning the corner. Susan said:

"I wouldn't say anything about what happened."

"All right," answered Asenath, "I won't."

"Just tell her we went home to supper and then walked back here. You can make up enough to keep her from getting on, can't you?"

"I guess so," said Asenath.

Mrs. McBride had come up to them by this time and they exchanged greetings and a little talk in which the clever Susan told the tale of their doings that she wished Mrs. McBride to believe, including an apology for the meal which Asenath was supposed to have been offered. She took advantage of this apology to give the alleged menu in detail, scenting that this would be a most natural question for Mrs. McBride to ask. When she left them, it was with the promise to meet them at church the following evening.

Asenath was thus saved the necessity of inventing any story, a task which would have exceeded her powers. And Mrs. McBride's curiosity as to the visit to Collins' having been thus satisfied, she was left free to talk of what she had in her mind while Asenath listened silently, her thoughts busy with her delightful experiences up to the moment of her flight.

Susan had gone to church at first merely to secure McBride's good will. But, as has been mentioned, she had not been slow to perceive what a powerful social

agency the church was. She made friends rapidly because she had a pleasing address. She was friendly without appearing forward. Her ready tongue was not often used to make the less articulate uncomfortable. She was willing, nay, anxious to please, and she found in the young folks who attended the church quite a number who had taken a fancy to her.

On the Wednesday evening following, she had been invited to visit one of the girls and had accepted. She did not have a chance to tell Asenath of it that evening, for the McBrides, contrary to their usual custom, left immediately after the services were over. McBride was suffering from a bilious attack and wanted to get home as soon as possible.

At lunch on Thursday Susan said to Asenath:

"You know May Wilson."

"Sure," said Asenath.

"Do you like her?"

"She's all right. I've never talked much to her."

"She asked me to come to see her at her house."

Asenath said nothing. So Susan went on.

"If I go, will you go with me?"

"Yes," answered Asenath. She was so fond of Susan that she would have been willing to go anywhere with her. "When are you going?"

"Tomorrow night," said Susan. "I think she's awful nice. She ain't terribly pretty and she ain't much for style, but she's sweet. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," answered Asenath. She had never thought of May Wilson at all, but she was quite willing to accept Susan's opinion as final. Susan went on:

"I can't see why you don't care for the crowd at the church. I think some of them are lovely. Why is it?"

"I don't know," answered Asenath. "I've always been going there ever since I was a little tot and I've grown up with them. Oh! I don't know. I guess they're all right."

"Maybe it's because you had to go. That makes a big difference."

Susan's approval of May Wilson and the expectation of visiting her in Susan's company were responsible for Asenath's looking forward to their projected call with great interest. Neither of the girls considered Asenath's going without an invitation as any infraction of the social code.

CHAPTER VI

MAY WILSON was older than her intending visitors. She was no longer in her teens and had almost reached the age which in some States would have made her eligible to cast the ballot. The youngest of the three children of her widowed mother, she alone remained at home.

Mrs. Wilson had a small income from her husband's estate which, helped out by May's very fair salary as a stenographer, enabled them to live quite comfortably. Mrs. Wilson's sole dissipation was church-going, and May went quite as regularly. Both of them were attracted by the same advantage which the church offered, but, while Mrs. Wilson said and believed that her assiduity in this respect was a manifestation of her strong religious feeling, May said and knew that her own interest was purely social. She sat through the services with complete disbelief in their virtue, while her mother felt that she was actually taking part in them and that she was thus helping the world.

From a worldly standpoint, however, May was quite a sophisticated young person. Ignorant of art and letters in their every aspect, except that she was a fairly accurate speller, she was yet shrewd, quick in observation and blessed with a retentive memory. She was not without a considerable social grace. Her dress was not

remarkable either for style or the absence of it. In this respect she was rather inconspicuous. Her invitation to Susan had come as the result of the recognition of a kindred spirit. Such a recognition is generally unreasoned. We seem to know instinctively when we are with our own.

May was much surprised to find Asenath in Susan's company when she opened the door. She did not care for Asenath. Perhaps she resented her beauty. She had known her from childhood and they had never had anything in common. Asenath's silence annoyed her; she was uncomfortable in her presence. She stood rather in fear of a judgment which was not pronounced and which she suspected was not favorable. In common with almost everyone who knew Asenath, she felt that this silence was the mark of a superior wisdom and she would not have hesitated to quote "Still waters run deep" as entirely applicable.

However, she greeted Asenath as an old friend and devoted her conversation almost entirely to Susan. Mrs. Wilson was not visible at first but the sounds issuing from the kitchen sink proclaimed both her whereabouts and her occupation.

The conversation was at first general. It was in the nature of a reconnaissance on both sides, each of them bent on locating the other's point of view. This applied only to May and Susan. Asenath did not talk at all, but she listened intently and had as much pleasure from the

colloquy as either of the participants. However, when apparel came to be discussed, she joined in the talk. This was her subject, the one in which she felt herself at perfect ease. There was no phase of the current modes with which she was unfamiliar. For dress she had an all-seeing eye. No detail escaped her.

Neither of the other girls was half so interested in this topic as Asenath, and so, after a while, the talk went to other things.

Suddenly May said, pointing to Susan's hand, "I see you use 'em."

Susan's eye followed May's glance and, recognizing that May alluded to a brownish stain on the thumb and first finger of her right hand, said:

"Oh! Now and then."

" 'Now and then' comes pretty often, don't it? What kind do you use?"

"Oh! Any kind that's handy."

"Mamma'll be going out in a few minutes, and, if you want to, I've got a few."

All this was a complete mystery to Asenath. She had no idea whatever of their meaning. However, she asked no question. She did not wish to display her ignorance.

Presently Mrs. Wilson came into the room in which the girls were sitting, exchanged a few words with them and departed. She had no sooner gone than May went out of the room to return in less than a minute with a package of cigarettes and a box of safety matches. She

offered them first to Susan, who helped herself to a cigarette and a match. In a moment whe was puffing away with the contentment of the practiced smoker. May offered the cigarettes next to Asenath.

"Do you smoke?" asked May.

"I never have yet," answered Asenath.

"Would you like to try one?"

"Yes."

Asenath took a cigarette from the box and put it in her mouth. May struck a match and held it to the cigarette.

"Now, draw on it," she said.

Asenath did so, inhaling the smoke. She was immediately seized with a fit of coughing which brought tears to her eyes. She tried it half a dozen times and finally mastered the feat sufficiently to enable her to inhale the smoke without coughing.

But she did not enjoy it and shortly laid the cigarette down in the saucer which May had provided as an ash receiver. She was conscious of a slight discomfort, which she correctly attributed to the effects of smoking.

"Don't you like it?" asked Susan.

"No," said Asenath. "I think it's horrid."

May and Susan went on smoking in evident enjoyment. They felt at peace with each other and the world. And then they took up the subject of all others, the young men they knew.

The only acquaintances which they held in common

were limited to the young men whom Susan had met at church. They were rather quickly disposed of with one exception, James Rawlings, looked upon as the great catch among all of the young fellows who were active in church work. James was about twenty-seven years old. He was a member of a family which, while not rich by any means, was still in excellent circumstances. He was a paying teller in one of the important Trust Companies, was held to be very bright, quite a man of the world. He was supposed to move in the best society, which meant no more than moderately wealthy society. He was also believed to dress very stylishly, but this was only a superlative method of stating that he wore rather good clothes. His manners were thought to represent the last degree of polish. They were good.

Actually, he was a very decent young man who was far from underrating himself in any particular. His conceit, however, was not offensive; it really did no more than to preserve a certain amount of dignity and to cause him to hold himself somewhat aloof from his church acquaintances in social affairs in which church activities played no part.

The fable of his greatness had reached Susan almost at once and, by the time of her third visit, she was as devout a believer as any of the young women who worshipped at his shrine.

The first view she had of him, after he had been identified for her, confirmed all of the reports she had

heard. He was, in fact, a good looking young fellow, dark, with fairly regular features. He was of medium height and average weight. Altogether his appearance was quite presentable and thoroughly undistinguished.

After some of the other young men of the church crowd had been discussed and variously classified, Susan asked:

"Don't you think Mr. Rawlings is lovely?"

May had been making a great effort for nearly a year to turn his friendliness at church and Sunday School to some personal account. Thus far, her failure had been complete. He never wavered in his politeness and friendliness at church, but he never made any move towards the development of a friendship with her elsewhere. May, therefore, had a distinct sense of pique in this regard, and was inclined to minimize his virtues.

"Oh! I don't know," she said. "I guess he's all right."

"Isn't his singing just wonderful?" went on Susan, apparently not observing May's lack of enthusiasm. "I've never heard anybody who wasn't a regular singer sing like that."

"He does sing well," assented May grudgingly.

"Don't he ever go out with any of the girls at all?" asked Susan, getting down to business.

"Oh, there's one girl he goes out with sometimes, about once a year."

"He's awful religious, ain't he?"

"He's religious enough around the church but I'm

not so sure what he does elsewhere. I've heard that he drinks his cocktail when he gets a chance."

The word "cocktail" had a very unpleasant sound for Asenath. She wondered how anyone could ever want to touch them. However, she was enjoying herself thoroughly. Never had she taken part in so "grown-up" a conversation.

"You don't say so," exclaimed Susan in answer to May's remark on the subject of Rawlings' indulgence in cocktails. "I'd never have thought it. Who's the girl he goes out with?"

"Laura Mitchell. Have you met her?"

"Is she the tall, dark complected girl that wore a tan suit on Sunday?"

"Yes."

"Is she nice?"

"She's all right, I guess. I don't have much to do with her." This was strictly true, but the reason for it was not, as May's remark would indicate, lack of initiative on her part, but was owing entirely to the fact that Laura Mitchell was much the superior of May intellectually and found her company quite tedious.

"What's her drag with Mr. Rawlings?" asked Susan.

May shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sure I don't know," she said, in a tone which suggested that the subject bored her. Susan perceived this but determined to make one more remark before it was dropped.

"I guess he'd never be able to 'see' a shrimp like me."

The smile with which May greeted this observation was intended to convey an appreciation of its humor and at the same time an insinuation that Susan was too modest by far. Having failed in all her attempts to interest Rawlings, it was only natural that she should not expect Susan to succeed. It would be difficult to explain just why Susan made this last remark. Certainly she could not have explained it herself. Really, it was a gage of battle, for Susan had determined to interest Rawlings. She did not know just how she would go about it, but she was confident that there must be some way and that she would find it.

Shortly after the discussion of Rawlings, Asenath and Susan left. Both of them felt that it had been a very successful evening, although neither of them said anything about it. In fact, as they walked towards McBrides' house in silence, they both felt serenely happy.

CHAPTER VII

SUSAN'S plans were not to be put into execution immediately. The summer season was at hand and church activities ceased. She did not lose sight of her intention, however, and, although she did not speak of it, the subject was often in her mind. Her friendship with Asenath continued and the girls were much together.

In a negative way, for the most part, Asenath did a great deal for her. To begin with, the atmosphere of the McBride household, where she was a frequent visitor, was entirely different from anything she had ever known, and gave her an entirely new viewpoint. McBride was, in the main, rather a silent man. Not that he had any hesitation in expressing his views upon occasion, but rather because he found little pleasure in talk for talk's sake. He liked Susan. To him she always represented the convert he had made. He enjoyed her ready wit, which, as their acquaintance developed and she felt more at ease with him, was frequently in evidence in their talks.

McBride tried several times to get Susan to bring her mother to church with her, but, while she was quite willing to promise to do what she could towards accomplishing this end, she never succeeded in getting her to come.

Asenath helped Susan with her clothes. She told her

what to buy, how to make it or have it made. She knew, as if by instinct, just what would accentuate Susan's every good point and what would minimize the poor ones. Her judgment in this matter seemed to Susan to be almost uncanny. She was so delighted with her appearance when, for the first time, she was completely dressed according to Asenath's instruction, that her estimate of her friend's cleverness was largely increased. It seemed to her, thus attired, that she had advanced in the social scale and that it was now incumbent upon her to be extremely particular in the choice of her associates.

Up to now, she had associated very freely with a large number of boys, but she had never had an intimate friend among the girls she knew. She had grown up almost entirely without parental supervision, at least since she was fourteen years old, when she had first gone to work.

But now she saw no boys at all. In the first place, she felt that those she knew were not the kind with whom she should associate and, in the second, she had set her mind upon Rawlings. He typified for her everything desirable in a man. As far as her imagination carried her, she figured him as representing supreme elegance, adequate wealth, certain distinction.

Although she had set her heart on attracting him, she thought it scarcely possible that she might finally marry him. It is true that at times this entered her head, but it seemed too remote a chance to be considered

seriously. What she wanted and what she believed she might obtain was his recognition of her as someone with whom he might associate independently of any relation which might arise through their meeting at church.

Susan was much too intelligent not to know she was without education. But, though she recognized her lack in this respect, she could not believe that it made any important difference. She felt that her manners were perfectly good, and that any attempt to "put on lugs," as she would have called it, would be mere affectation. She felt that she had the personal charm, the ready wit, the vivacity to carry her through. She was sure that she could keep up with him if she only had the chance. And the chance was what she determined she would have.

She talked to Asenath about Rawlings several times, but received answers which indicated a total lack of interest in him. Asenath had seen him frequently but had scarcely ever talked to him, by which is meant that he had scarcely ever talked to her. She had never said anything to him at all except "good morning" and "good evening," or "yes" or "isn't it?" when he had made some cheerful remark about the weather or some other similarly important topic. She never saw him in the summer at all, for neither of them went to church, and elsewhere she had never seen him.

Asenath was in the habit of spending two weeks of every summer in the country. Mrs. McBride's brother-in-law, William Hammond, was a farmer in fair cir-

cumstances, who was, however, not above adding to his income by the entertainment of summer boarders. Asenath did not pay. She was an invited guest and the obligation thus created was usually discharged by a return visit by the Hammonds to the McBrides, some time during the winter. While she was still a little girl, that is, up to the age of fourteen, Asenath looked forward with pleasure to her annual outing. Beyond that age, it had lost its charm. She was no longer interested in purely childish things and she was not old enough to be treated as anything but a child. There was rarely any society for her except her cousin Anna, who was slightly younger and whom she cordially disliked for no specific reason whatever. Anna was no fonder of her. The two girls were forced to room together and this made their association particularly irksome, as they never felt able to indulge in real quarrel, the parental rule over both being far too strict. Instead, they simply tolerated each other, each fully aware of the quality of her cousin's esteem. This was one of Asenath's reasons for not enjoying her visit to her aunt, whose name, by the way, she bore.

This year, however, Anna would not be at home, and Asenath conceived a brilliant scheme. She was to use Anna's bedroom, which would accommodate two. Why not then secure an invitation for Susan? She asked Susan if she would care to accept and was told that she would "simply love to go." It was not difficult to get Mrs.

McBride to write to her sister to obtain the invitation, which came immediately. It was not even difficult to arrange that the two girls should take their vacations at the same time. They were allowed one week.

To Susan, who had never spent more than part of one day in the country, the projected visit was a great adventure. All of her previous experience in the way of outings was confined to an occasional day at the seashore. Her idea of rural life was based largely on what she had seen in the theatre, with particular reference to moving pictures.

In her limited description of her uncle's farm, Asenath had not placed any emphasis upon the fact that Susan would encounter summer boarders. They had never had any interest for Asenath, and, if she mentioned the matter at all, it had been so casually that Susan was quite unprepared to see so many faces when she came into the dining room for the first time.

The boarders were of the usual variety. Three elderly spinsters and two wives, one with two and the other with three small children, whose husbands came only at week-ends, made up the party.

It required only a few minutes for Susan to determine that she was in the presence of gentility and she, therefore, exercised great care in her behavior. She was bent upon her own social advancement and saw here further opportunity to obtain a foothold upon a higher rung in the social ladder. She listened intently to the conversa-

tion, noting phrases which appeared to her to possess elegance and which expressed an outlook upon life which to her seemed quite distinguished. She took very little part in the conversation and promptly acquired a reputation for modesty and an agreeable disposition.

Asenath took no part in the conversation at all unless an occasional smile of recognition and an absolutely necessary monosyllable may be so called.

After supper, it was the evening meal, the two girls, each with an arm about the other's waist, walked down the lane which led to the farm. Susan was enthusiastic. The sun was setting and she felt the beauty of the softly lighted early summer landscape.

"Oh! Isn't it gorgeous?" she exclaimed. "I think the country is just beautiful."

"Yes," said Asenath. "I like it now, but I never did before."

They walked on in silence. In a few minutes they reached the main road. For a moment they stood at the meeting of the two roads, and then choosing the direction in which the main road took a sharp turn about a piece of woodland, walked on. As they made the turn in the road they saw an automobile at the edge of the deep ditch, evidently held up on account of some mechanical trouble, for two young men were carefully inspecting the engine. They were in earnest conversation and did not observe the approach of the two girls until they were within a few yards.

"I beg your pardon," said one of them, raising his cap, "we're in trouble. Can you tell us where the nearest garage is?"

Susan looked at Asenath, expecting her, as one acquainted with the country, to give the desired information.

Asenath took the hint.

"I don't know," she said; "we're visitors here at my uncle's farm, just around the bend in the road. But if you'll go there, I guess Uncle William will be able to tell you." She was distinctly pleased with the young man who had asked the question. It was not merely his good looks, although he had them in plenty. He was tall, slightly less than six feet; fair, with regular features, large expressive gray eyes; his nose was rather large, his mouth and chin stood for character and determination. It was not his pleasant voice nor his manner of speaking which would have plainly indicated both breeding and education to anyone able to appreciate it; it was something quite intangible. But whatever it was, Asenath made no question of it; she simply liked him at once.

He thanked her and started off in the direction indicated, leaving his companion standing by the machine. Asenath would have liked to accompany him but did not know how to make the offer. So, after his departure, she and Susan continued their walk.

When they returned, about half an hour later, they found the machine standing where they had left it but

neither of the young men were in sight. They went on towards the house and, entering, saw them both in the dining room eating supper.

Some few minutes later, the young men came into the parlor, where Asenath and Susan were sitting. They were followed by Mrs. Hammond, who introduced them as Mr. Larned, who proved to be the one who had addressed the girls, and Mr. Graham. They were about the same age, twenty-five years, and seemed also to be of much the same type, although Graham was as dark as his companion was fair.

"Your aunt has been good enough to take us in, Miss McBride," said Larned. "We shall have to haul the car into the barn and leave it there until we can get a new connecting rod. We'll telephone to town tomorrow morning and have it sent out by a special messenger. It ought to be here in the afternoon." He wondered why he should feel impelled to make this explanation to her. There did not seem to be any apparent reason for supposing her to be interested.

To Asenath, the explanation was music. She found him charming and wished to say something that would show him how glad she was to help make him welcome. But nothing came, and in its stead she gave him a smile which betokened an interested, sympathetic understanding. That is, at least, how Larned read it. He would likely have felt ill at ease, no matter what she might have said under the circumstances, for he

was still wondering what had made him offer the unnecessary explanation. He was not yet fully aware that the mere sight of her had held such charm for him that he felt it incumbent upon him to justify his presence before her.

Asenath's smile had set him at ease and, after that, conversation was easy.

"This is a lovely part of the country, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," said Asenath. "I love it."

Graham put in a word here. "I learn from Mrs. Hammond that you are only here for a short time."

"Yes," said Asenath. "Sue and I are only going to stay one week. We've just come."

"Are you equally fond of the country, Miss Collins?" asked Larned. He did not like her. She appeared to great disadvantage in the presence of her friend. Neither was Graham attracted to her. Nor was he particularly attracted to Asenath, although he was quite conscious of her beauty. But then his interest in the sex was already determined in the direction of a certain young lady who is of no importance to us at present.

"I'm just crazy about it," answered Susan. "It's the first time I've ever been to a farm. I've always gone to the shore."

There was a little more general conversation and then Larned and Graham left to superintend the hauling of their car into the barn. The girls went out on the

porch and listened to the conversation of the ladies for a while, but not finding that interesting, Asenath proposed going to bed.

As they were undressing, she interrupted Susan's flow of talk by asking:

"Isn't Mr. Larned grand?"

"Oh! I don't know," answered Susan. "He seems to be all right but he's kind of—I don't know just what to call it. He ain't sissified but he's got kind of a soft way of talking."

"I think he's fine," said Asenath, after a short pause. "I just love to hear him talk." She paused again and reflected for a moment. "Did you notice his hands? Aren't they beautiful?"

"No," answered Susan. "I didn't take notice of that. His friend, what was his name? didn't have much to say for himself."

"Didn't he?" queried Asenath. "I didn't notice."

In their room, as Larned and Graham were getting ready for bed, the former said:

"That McBride girl is a beauty, isn't she?"

"She's certainly very pretty, but the other's just the regular type, what you might call the 'garden variety,' I suppose."

"Yes, she makes an admirable foil for the other. Not that she needs any foil. I've got it," Larned said suddenly.

"Got what?" asked Graham.

"The moment I saw Miss McBride, I was struck with her resemblance to someone I had met, and ever since, I've been cudgeling my brains to locate her. And now I know. She's the living counterpart of Madame Vigée le Brun; you know the picture, the one with her child."

"Oh! Yes. Sure," said Graham. "She does look like her. She looks quite the lady. I wonder if she's got any brains."

"I don't doubt it," said Larned. "Of course, it was impossible to form any opinion in the sort of talk we had, but she gave me the impression of being extremely intelligent."

They talked of other subjects for a while and then bade each other good night.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next morning Susan was taken in tow by one of the elderly spinsters, Miss Larue, who had conceived a fancy for her. Their talk, which had begun on the porch shortly after breakfast, was continued in Miss Larue's room, where she had sundry treasures which she wished to show to Susan. Asenath had been with her friend when the talk had begun and had been a silent and uninterested listener. When Miss Larue asked Susan to go to her room, an invitation had likewise been extended to Asenath, but it was declined very sweetly. It was comfortable on the porch and she was very happy in the contemplation of the image of Mr. Larned which was present in her mind.

Her delight when he approached her shortly after Susan's departure was unbounded. That is, of course, internally. Externally "Welcome" was the keynote of her expression. There was no mistaking the sincerity of her greeting.

"Good morning, Miss McBride," said Larned.

"Good morning," answered Asenath.

"I hope you rested well," he began, "but that's a silly remark to make to anyone who looks as fresh as you."

"I always sleep well."

"At your age, I suppose it is to be expected." At twenty-five, eighteen seems very young.

"Yes," said Asenath.

"What would you say to a little stroll?" inquired Larned.

"All right," said Asenath. "I'll get my hat."

"Do you need it? We won't go far."

"But it's sunny—"

"And your complexion."

Asenath smiled assent.

"Well, a complexion like yours is worth saving."

She made no answer but ran away to get her hat. It was a full minute before she returned, because with Asenath, putting on a hat was putting on a hat and not merely throwing it on.

"All ready," she said when she reappeared.

"Where shall we walk?" he asked. "You ought to know the good places."

"There's an awful pretty brook over there," said Asenath, pointing in the direction of the rear of the house.

"Let's go there," said the other. And off they went, following a little path which led around the house and across a meadow to a line of trees indicating the presence of running water.

They began their walk in silence, a silence however of short duration. It was broken by Larned.

"Did anyone ever tell you," he asked, "that you resemble Madame Vigée le Brun?"

"No," said Asenath. She had, of course, never heard of her.

"You've seen her picture, surely."

"I don't remember," said Asenath thoughtfully. "Who was she?"

Larned was struck with what he would have called an entire absence of affectation. He admired her candor, her frankness in admitting her ignorance. He was sure that most girls would have pretended that they knew by taking care not to commit themselves.

"She was a French artist of the Eighteenth Century. She painted a picture of herself holding her child. She was very beautiful."

"Was she?" asked Asenath, delighted.

"Yes, she was, and you are very beautiful too. You are almost the exact image of her, except that you are younger."

Asenath showed her pleasure plainly. She felt that she ought to enter some sort of disclaimer, but she could not think of any that seemed suitable for use in this case. And Larned, seeing her pleasure and noting that she made no mock-modest denial of his appreciation, set it down as another evidence of her clean straightforwardness and refreshing simplicity. He found her utterly charming.

There was a short silence after Larned's last remark. And again it was he who broke it.

"Tell me all about yourself," he said.

"Tell you about me?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes; you."

"There's nothing to tell."

"There must be."

"No; there's nothing at all. You tell me about yourself."

"All right. Here it is in a nutshell. Name, Harold Prentis Larned. Age, twenty-five next September. Profession, school teacher. Branch, Physics. Religion, none that would be recognized by any regular church. Favorite flower, cauliflower, and so on."

"Oh, I can do that too," cried Asenath. This was really the most interesting conversation she had ever had in her life. "My name's Asenath McBride. What comes next?"

"Your age."

"Eighteen. Nineteen in December. Now what?"

"Profession."

"Telephone operator. Now what?"

"Religion."

"Presbyterian."

"Are you very devout?"

"I don't know. I ain't crazy to go to church. We just go—every Sunday and every Wednesday evening too."

"Don't you enjoy going?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I don't mind it so much. Do you go to church?"

"Never. Unless for a wedding or a funeral."

Asenath smiled her approval. He thought that he had never seen so sweet a look as she wore. In fact,

Asenath was in gayer mood than she had ever known.

They had reached the brook by this time and stood looking at the running water, fascinated as all of us are by the murmur and the ever-changing pattern of the stream.

It was again Larned who broke the silence.

"I'm awfully glad that we had our accident here. I almost wish the connecting rod wouldn't come today. I feel as though I'd like to become very well acquainted with you."

Asenath could not think of a suitable answer. She still looked at the brook.

Larned did not know quite how to understand her silence. There was no doubt whatever in his mind that she liked him, for her bearing was more than cordial. Perhaps it was shyness. Assuredly it must be so, a sweet maidenly reserve which but added to her attractiveness.

This time it was Asenath who broke the silence.

"Tell me about Madame ——, the French artist."

"Oh! Madame Vigée le Brun. I'm afraid I don't know very much myself, except that she was born about 1750 and lived a long while. You see, I've sort of taken her for granted, like we do with many things."

Asenath looked at him with an expression of the keenest interest. As she said nothing, he went on:

"I have a little copy of the picture I spoke about before. Would you like to have it?"

"I'd love to," said Asenath with warmth.

"If you'll give me your address, I'll mail it to you when I get back to town."

"That would be lovely," she answered. "Thank you ever so much."

She gave him her address, which he noted in a little memorandum book, and then they resumed their walk. The talking was done almost entirely by Larned. He told her some of the incidents of the trip which he and Graham had undertaken and sundry other matters which proceeded naturally from what had gone before. When they returned, both of them felt that they had had a most enjoyable time. Until now, Asenath never met anyone of Larned's quality and she was ready to call him "wonderful." It is quite as true that he had never met anyone exactly like her before, and, while it is certain that he would not have applied the same adjective, he was charmed by her as by no girl he had ever met.

At the house, on their return, they found Graham waiting for them. The new connecting rod had arrived and a mechanic from a nearby garage was at work putting it in place.

After the midday dinner, the two young men took their departure. As he was bidding good-bye to Asenath, Larned said: "I hope we'll meet again. It has been very pleasant."

"Good-bye," she said, her expression telling him what he wanted to know.

A few days after her return home Asenath received a

small photogravure copy of Vigée le Brun's portrait of herself and her daughter, accompanied by these words written on the back of a visiting card:

> "I am sure you will see the resemblance instantly. It is most striking. With the most delightful recollections of a pleasant walk in the country,
>
> Yours, H. P. L."

Asenath was delighted with the picture, which she recognized as one she had seen before but had not given sufficient attention to lead her to observe the likeness. She saw it now, incomplete as it was by reason of the difference in headdress. She arranged her hair in the fashion shown in the picture and then the resemblance was complete. She stood before the glass for a long time, the picture in her hand, gazing alternately at it and her reflection. It seemed as though she would never tire of her first real appreciation of graphic art.

She began a note of thanks to Larned.

> Dear Mr. Larned:—
>
> The picture came and I want to thank you for it. It is so beautiful that—

And there she stuck. She felt that she must in some way qualify her acceptance of the resemblance between the picture and herself. Her code of etiquette made it obligatory. But, although she made six or seven attempts to find a satisfactory phrase, she was unable to do so.

And so the receipt of the picture was never acknowledged.

PART TWO
RAWLINGS
CHAPTER IX

IT was early in October that Susan felt that the time had arrived to make a test of her ability to interest Rawlings. She had considered many plans, but none of them seemed practical. The feeling that she must not show any initiative was intuitive. That was as firmly fixed as the stars in their courses. She knew that in the end she would have to depend on herself, but that would be only after Rawlings' interest had been aroused.

Finally she hit upon this plan: She was sure that Rawlings would not be able to decline a direct invitation from McBride to dine at his house. McBride was quite as active in church work as Rawlings, and an invitation for a definite date would have to be accepted. She was in no doubt whatever as to her ability to induce McBride to issue the invitation.

Coming from church on the first Sunday morning in October to dine with the McBrides, Susan saw her opportunity.

"Mr. McBride," she said, as they walked along, "don't you think Mr. Harmon is a lovely man?"

Mr. Harmon was the minister.

"He's a very fine man," answered McBride; "one of God's chosen ministers."

"I've often wondered how it would be to meet a man like that, you know what I mean, at home."

"He's a fine man, no matter where you meet him."

"Does he ever come to see you at your house?"

"Yes, he comes once a year. It's a large church and it takes time to get around."

"Did you ever invite him to a meal at your house?"

"No; we never did."

"Don't you think it would be fine?"

"It's worth thinking about," said McBride thoughtfully.

"You could make up a nice little party. Mr. and Mrs. Harmon, and—and—Mr. Rawlings?" This last questioningly.

"Yes; Rawlings would be all right."

"And," asked Susan, taking it now as an accomplished fact, "may I come, too?"

"Surely we'd have you," he answered.

At the dinner table, McBride startled the other members of his family by announcing:

"I've been thinking we'll invite Mr. Harmon and his wife for supper some night soon. I'll speak to him Wednesday night. We'll have James Rawlings, too."

The fiat had gone forth and that left nothing to be done by the women of the family except the arrangement of the details. There was never any question when McBride made an announcement.

The supper was fixed for the second Friday following.

McBride had consulted Mr. Harmon and he had set this date. Rawlings had also accepted. He was bored but he aspired to become one of the elders of the church and McBride was an influential member, due to his activity and regularity.

The preparation for the meal was quite an affair. Every detail of the menu was submitted to McBride, who considered each item carefully and gave his final judgment. Asenath, who had been going over one of her fashion magazines, made some suggestions which were the result of her attention having been called to a picture of a dinner-table which she found on one of its pages. It had caught her eye because it really was a very good looking picture. Asenath had read the article which it illustrated and had thus learned the menu which had been offered at the dinner. She was convinced that a meal of this kind would be in good style. The simplicity, the almost frugality of it impressed her probably for the same reason that she instinctively chose the most becoming costumes for herself from the pages of the same magazine.

McBride scarcely listened to her. What he wanted and what was actually served was a dinner; they called it supper, on account of the hour, which consisted of roast turkey, six vegetables and three kinds of dessert, with large cups of coffee served at the beginning of the meal. In view of the fact that the service was to be in the hands of Mrs. McBride, Asenath and Susan, the sort of meal decided upon was much more practical than

the five-course dinner suggested by Asenath. Everything except the dessert was to be put on the table before they sat down and the plates would be passed around. When the main portion of the meal was finished, the three women would clear the table and bring in the dessert. When it was over the men would retire into the parlor while the women cleared up. The washing of dishes could be left until later.

By Susan's contrivance, Rawlings sat between the two girls. There was not much opportunity for her in this placing of him, because what conversation there was, while conducted almost exclusively by Mr. Harmon and McBride, had to be attended by the others as the utterances of the Delphic oracle.

After all, the principal business of the meal was eating. Susan made some side remarks to Rawlings in which she praised his singing. As he held his talent in this respect in rather high regard, he was much pleased. He felt it necessary to say that his singing was nothing much. Susan then adverted to a particular performance of his which she said had been most beautiful. This moved him to talk about it and himself generally. The genuine interest which Susan showed in what he had to say made her rather agreeable to him. At one point in his talk, he made a somewhat disparaging remark about his performance of a hymn on the preceding Sunday afternoon. Susan took issue with him, whereupon he turned to his left and appealed to Asenath.

She had not been listening to their talk and the question had to be explained to her. When she understood, she said:

"I don't know."

"But surely, you know whether it was good or bad or whether or not you liked it."

"I didn't listen to it," she answered.

This piqued Rawlings, and he endeavored to draw her into an argument on the subject, but she eluded him. The greater his effort, the less satisfaction he received, and finally he gave it up and devoted to Susan all of the interludes between the utterances of the oracles.

The party broke up at an early hour. More or less stupefied by the large quantity of food he had eaten, McBride gave distinct evidence of sleepiness, and so, when Mr. Harmon said at about nine o'clock that they would have to be going, his host made only a half-hearted protest.

Mrs. Harmon and Susan retired to put on their hats and wraps. When they returned presently, "good-nights" were said, the guests declared they had enjoyed themselves greatly and the hosts had asked for another opportunity to act as their entertainers.

The quartet walked down the street together, Mr. and Mrs. Harmon in the lead.

Rawlings asked Susan:

"Where do you live, Miss Collins?"

Susan told him. It was a decidedly poor section of the city.

"May I see you home?" asked Rawlings, politely. He had no wish to go.

"Oh, you needn't bother. I'm used to going home alone," protested Susan. She was somewhat embarrassed.

"It wouldn't be any bother at all," answered Rawlings.

"If you'll just take me as far as the car, I'll be all right. Please."

"Just as you wish. But I'd be very glad to go all the way. It isn't late."

But Susan was determined that he should not go. "Please don't bother," she said with sufficient finality to convince him.

Rawlings saw her safely on board her car and then walked home. He was somewhat mystified. In one evening, two different girls, two very young girls, too, had asserted themselves in his presence. Susan's refusal of his escort meant nothing much to him. It was far more convenient not to accompany her, but that she should not jump at the chance of having James Rawlings for a cavalier, even though it might be obvious that his offer was due to politeness only, rather piqued him. But Asenath's indifference was a deeper wound. He was not much of a ladies' man, but what little he had had to do with girls had accustomed him to look for both admiration and gratitude from them for no more than his notice.

As he pondered this matter, it suddenly occurred to him that he would have to make some return for his evening's entertainment. Of course, he would have to call on the family. But he felt that that would not be sufficient. He must do something which would place the obligation on their side.

The only thing possible was some entertainment to be offered to Asenath. He could not very well take the whole family out. He was not well placed to have them all at dinner at his house, as he lived with a married sister, whose husband attended another church. Finally he decided to ask Asenath to accompany him to a concert to be given on Saturday of the next week. He would thus have a chance to pay her for her indifference.

He made the proposal on Sunday. Asenath accepted it very sweetly but without the enthusiasm that Rawlings expected. After she had expressed her willingness to go, he asked her how she would like to have him call for her early and take her to dinner at one of the restaurants. He mentioned a very expensive place of which Asenath knew no more than that it was supposed to be "very swell."

"I'll ask mamma," said Asenath, this time with more interest. "I guess she'll say it's all right. I'll see you at Sunday School and tell you."

When she saw him in the afternoon she announced that her parents' consent had been obtained, but she did not tell him that nothing but Rawlings' reputation

for Godliness had prevailed against McBride's prejudice against such places. He had refused at first, but for once his wife had dared to question his decision. She had pointed out that the very best people went to this place, among them a Presbyterian minister of national reputation who had been entertained there by some rich members of their own congregation. The discussion had the effect of largely increasing Asenath's interest in the affair. Her general lack of interest in her surroundings at this particular time was partly due to the fact that the memory of her morning with Larned was almost constantly in her mind. She frequently upbraided herself for her failure to acknowledge the receipt of the picture he had sent her while it was yet time.

Now it was too late.

CHAPTER X

PROMPTLY at six o'clock on Saturday evening, Rawlings stepped out of a taxicab and rang the McBrides' doorbell. Mrs. McBride, following a custom which has the force of great tradition, peered out of the window before answering. When she saw the taxicab, she was greatly excited. Nothing of the kind had ever happened before in her experience. She called to Asenath, as she went down the stairs:

"He's come in a taxi!"

Asenath was surprised beyond measure. A taxi! This was life indeed. Rawlings certainly knew how to do things. Now she could feel perfectly comfortable in her new dress. She had been in some doubt about it, for it was in the very latest fashion, and wearing it in a street-car would surely subject her to staring. She was nearly ready when the bell rang, but she did not descend at once. It was not premeditated but instinctive. She employed the three or four minutes in assuring herself of the complete correctness of her attire in every particular.

When she came into the parlor, Rawlings was delighted with her appearance. He had never before been fully conscious of her beauty. If anyone had asked him what sort of looks she had, it would have been necessary for him to have taken thought before he

answered. He would undoubtedly have said that "she wasn't a bad looking girl." But now, he recognized she was more than that, and would have been willing to admit that she was quite worthy, at least in appearance, of the somewhat elaborate entertainment he had planned for the purpose of convincing the McBrides that he was a very big man indeed.

Asenath's pleasure in the affair had not figured in his calculations at all. Even now, in his satisfaction with her appearance, he was thinking of the favorable impression she would make upon any of his acquaintances who might see her with him. He was surprised that the daughter of such commonplace people could have such an air of distinction and wear such good looking clothes with so much grace and poise.

He greeted her with a compliment upon her looks, which she acknowledged with a grateful smile. She felt somewhat ill at ease, excited. This was the first time in her life that a man had come to see her. Never, in all of her dreams, had she imagined such splendor as this. Rawlings was in evening dress.

Mrs. McBride exchanged a few words with him before they left; she watched them start off in the taxi and then ran upstairs to discuss the matter with McBride, who had been unable to appear.

The talk between Asenath and Rawlings in the cab was rather disjointed. She scarcely heard what he said, so intent was she upon the novel situation in which she

found herself. She answered his remarks with monosyllables only.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Asenath was newly excited. The attendant in uniform who opened the door of the cab, the canopy over the street, the thick carpet of the entrance hall, the maid who attended her in the ladies' room were all new experiences. Excited as she was, there was no indication of it in her demeanor. She received every attention without making any false steps, simply because she exercised no initiative at all and always awaited action on the part of the others. Only when her wraps had been taken from her and she had again assured herself of the correctness of every detail of her dress did she ask a question:

"Will Mr. Rawlings come here for me?"

The maid indicated a door, which Asenath opened and found Rawlings awaiting her. This was his first sight of her without her coat and his pleasure was even greater than before.

"All ready?" he asked.

"All ready," she said and walked with him to the door of the main dining room. The head waiter greeted Rawlings by name, a custom which pleased him greatly because he felt that it indicated his social prominence as a frequent guest in this fashionable place, but which made no impression on the inexperienced Asenath, who took it quite as a matter of course.

When they were seated at a reserved and specially decorated table, the special character of which was unsuspected by Asenath, Rawlings asked her if she had any choice as to food.

"No," answered she, "you order. I don't want very much. I ain't a bit hungry."

"Do you care for oysters?"

"Oh! yes. But you just order whatever you please. Only not much."

Rawlings gave an order. He was without much imagination in this particular and did not venture very far. He selected oysters on the shell, a steak, some potatoes and celery. He wondered whether it would look well to order a cocktail of some sort, but decided that he had better not.

While the order was being given, Asenath's eyes were busy. She saw everything, but the women's costumes particularly claimed her attention. She was supremely happy. Her first embarrassment had worn off, and while she was still somewhat excited, which was visible only in her heightened color, she was quite comfortable and able to enjoy the adventure to the full.

When the waiter departed, Rawlings engaged her in conversation. He tried to draw her out, but found it impossible. She did not respond to any of his leads. She answered any direct question he put to her and agreed with all of his statements either by word or expression, but did not follow up any subject which he

introduced. At last, he asked her if she was fond of dancing.

"I love it," said Asenath with warmth, "but I've hardly ever had a chance to try it."

"How's that?" he asked.

"Well, you know papa thinks dancing's wrong."

"Oh, I suppose he would. I never thought of that. How did you learn then?"

"Sue showed me at the exchange at lunch time. The only time—" She was about to tell of her dances with Tom Holland, when she suddenly remembered Susan's admonition on this subject and was silent. Rawlings waited for her to finish her sentence, but as she made no move to do so, he asked:

"What were you going to say? You said 'the only time.'"

"Oh! I was just thinking," she answered. She would have liked to change the subject but no lead came to her. Rawlings waited again without result. At last, he asked:

"Thinking of what?"

"Oh! just thinking."

The waiter saved her by bringing the oysters. After he had gone, Rawlings said:

"You and Miss Collins are great friends, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Asenath.

"Were you acquainted with her before you went to the telephone company?"

"No."

"What sort of a girl is she?"

"She's lovely."

"What kind of people are her family?"

"I've never met any of them."

"Have you never been at their house?"

"No."

"How's that?"

"I don't know. I've just never gone. Sue always comes to our house."

"Is she bright?"

"Oh! yes. She's wonderful."

"Wonderful? How?"

"Oh! I don't know. She just knows how to do anything."

"She seems very bright," said Rawlings, remembering the favorable impression she had made at the meal at McBrides'. "I suppose they're very poor people."

"I guess so," answered Asenath.

Their talk was much like this. Rawlings liked to talk about himself and tried to get Asenath to make an opportunity for him, but she never did. Finally, he gave up waiting for her to give him the lead and made it for himself. She listened attentively to all he said and gave every indication of cordial interest and approval in her facial expression, but she said nothing. Rawlings was nonplused. He was used to flattery and this girl gave him none of it. She was scarcely more

than a child, and certainly she could not be used to the kind of entertainment he was offering her, yet she seemed as composed and self-possessed as though this was an everyday affair, accepting all he offered without comment of any kind.

He had never been so much interested by any girl. He was sure, now that he had seen her to advantage, having been her sole companion for more than an hour, that she was more beautiful than anyone he had ever known. And it was not mere beauty of face; she had a carriage, a grace, a presence which were thoroughly in keeping. Her smile was particularly lovely. When he saw it, he was conscious of a thrill of pleasure. He no longer thought of his primary object in inviting her. That was gone and in its stead he felt only the desire to please her.

They finished their dinner and he led her to the women's room. When she re-appeared, he had ordered another taxi, although they were less than half a dozen blocks from their destination and it was a clear, mild evening.

Asenath disappointed him because she made no comment on his extravagance, but acted as though she were accustomed to just this sort of thing. He wanted the opportunity to say something in justification of his magnificence, but her silence gave him no opening. The discomfiture which he felt acted as a spur. He was determined to compel some expression of admiration.

The concert was a wonderful experience for Asenath. Good music appealed to her. She did not understand any part of its technique, as her whole musical education was limited to what little she had learned at the public school. But, even without understanding, her pleasure was complete. She gave herself up to undefined, blissful emotion. Almost all of the good music she had ever heard was confined to the better parts of the music at the church. The organist was a man of taste and used as much good material as was possible.

In the intervals between the numbers, Rawlings made comments on the quality of the performance, finding some parts admirable and others unsatisfactory. Asenath agreed with his approval and listened to his disapproval. To her it was all beautiful.

When it was over, he proposed that they dance for a little while before going home. Another taxi took them back to the restaurant in which they had dined. In the three dances which they permitted themselves, Rawlings found that he had never had a more satisfactory partner. She seemed to divine his intention almost before it came to him. He found himself regretting the necessity for taking her home early.

At eleven o'clock there was another taxi, and ten minutes later he heard her say: "I've had a lovely time. Thank you ever so much. Good-night."

CHAPTER XI

IF Rawlings could have heard the conversation between Asenath and her mother which began immediately after his departure and lasted until nearly one o'clock, he would have been perfectly satisfied with himself as a paragon of entertainers. But this joy was denied him and he sat in his taxi on the way home a prey to decidedly mixed emotions.

Of one emotion he was poignantly aware and that was that he wanted to see Asenath again as soon as possible. He tried to convince himself that this was not true, that nothing had happened to alter his hitherto complete self-sufficiency, but he could not do it. He wanted to be with her. Out of the evening's happenings, many were far from satisfactory to him. He had had no specific acknowledgment of his lavish generosity. There had been no definite recognition of his attractiveness. There had been no flattery. He did not admit to himself that he wanted these expressly, but he felt their absence. It seemed to him that, underlying Asenath's graciousness, there was a coolness, an aloofness which implied some inadequacy on his part. He tried to analyze the cause of his dissatisfaction but could not. There was no distinct action of hers nor any part of her demeanor with which he could find fault, and yet it seemed to him that he had been held

at arm's length by this mere chit, and it annoyed him.

But still, he wanted to see her again. Her image was before him, the sensation of her body in his arms as they danced was yet warm. What had come over him? This was a new experience and one he did not like. It hurt his pride. Always before, on the somewhat rare occasions on which he had acted as a cavalier, he had come away with a sense of satisfaction. The girl had always shown her gratitude impressively, had always made him feel rather magnificent. This had given him the opportunity to dispense favor or to withhold it with no other object than the gratification of his vanity.

Suddenly it occurred to him that tomorrow would be Sunday and he could see her at church. A surge of joy overcame him at the thought. It would be only a few hours. And then came a realization that it would never do to show his feeling so plainly. He would not go to church at all next day. There were plenty of reasons for his remaining away.

No sooner had the door of the McBrides' house closed than Mrs. McBride said:

"Tell me all about it. You had a fine time, didn't you?"

"Grand," declared Asenath. "I never had a better time. He's awful liberal. Just think, four taxis, one to go to the restaurant, one to go to the concert, one to go back to the restaurant—"

"Did you go back there? What for?" asked Mrs. McBride.

"We had some lemonade," answered her daughter, suddenly remembering that it would be quite as well not to mention dancing.

"And one to come home," said Mrs. McBride. "I think that's extravagance. What did you have for supper?"

"Raw oysters, steak, potatoes, celery, ice cream. Oh! It was lovely. There were flowers on the table, and he made me take some of them to wear. I left them in the taxi. It's a beautiful place and everything's so nice and quiet."

"How was the concert?"

"Fine."

And so on until Mrs. McBride had exhausted her capacity for questioning and Asenath had told everything she could think of.

There was one question, however, that Mrs. McBride did not ask, but it was constantly in her mind. It grew out of the possibility that Rawlings might become a suitor for her daughter's hand. This was but motherly interest. Nothing could be more natural. To have her daughter marry a man of Rawlings' evident wealth, not to mention his superior social position, seemed ambitious indeed, but then, ambitious or not, she was sure that he could not do better. It was true the McBrides were not rich, but they were as good as anybody.

Asenath got into bed but did not sleep. She was far too happy. Ah, life was good and she was a lucky girl.

In all of her dreams, she had never fancied that such luxury might be hers. She knew that there were fine restaurants; that there must be many elegances within the command of the rich; that there were servants to do their bidding, automobiles to carry them wherever they wished; but that she should enjoy them without stint, that all of this should actually come to her, she had never seriously imagined. Rawlings must be very rich. Otherwise he never would have been able to spend such enormous sums so freely. She wondered whether she had borne herself well, whether she had done what he expected.

And then she wondered why he had done all of this for her. It must be that he liked her, that he found her worthy of his attentions. What would Susan say when she heard it? Would she be jealous? No, Susan was above that; she would be pleased to hear it. Would she think Rawlings was fond of her? Was he?

And then came another question:

Was she fond of Rawlings? Of course, she liked him. It was fine to be with him. He talked so well. He was so much a man of the world. He just ordered those taxis and their dinner as though it was the most ordinary thing imaginable. Of course, she liked him. And then came a memory of Larned and a comparison. Would he have done as much for her? She could not answer, but she felt that there was something about him that was missing in Rawlings; she could not tell what, but it was

something that made him stand out before her as, well, just different. But this was silly. What right had she to think of him? She had not had the common decency to acknowledge his gift.

Ah well, it had been a lovely evening and perhaps she might have another like it. Rawlings certainly must have enjoyed it as well. He had complimented her on her dancing. He danced beautifully, too. When he led her, she could just lose herself in the joy of it. She had wanted to tell him how well he danced, but the words simply would not come. Next time, perhaps, if there was a next time—and she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII

SUSAN'S first emotion when she learned that Rawlings had invited Asenath to go to the concert with him was jealousy. For a moment she was angry and felt that her friend had not used her well. But it was only for a moment, and then her good sense resumed the mastery. It was obvious that this invitation had not come through any seeking of Asenath and certainly any estrangement between the two girls would stand in the way of the realization of Susan's hopes. But it was not all self-interest on her part. She was really very fond of Asenath and their friendship was a reality, while her ambition with regard to Rawlings was no more than a dream.

On the Sunday following Asenath's evening with Rawlings, Susan appeared at McBrides' house shortly after breakfast. She and Asenath promptly retired to the latter's room and, without any preliminaries, entered into a discussion of the happenings of the preceding evening.

"Tell me all about it," said Susan, "from the very beginning."

Asenath went over the matter in some detail. The principal emphasis was laid on the four taxis, the elegance of the restaurant, the dance after the concert.

"He's some swell provider, ain't he?" said Susan with enthusiasm.

"He's just grand," said Asenath.

"How was he to you?" inquired Susan.

"How do you mean?" asked her friend.

"Oh! you know. Did he act as though he liked you?"

"I don't know. He was awful nice."

"Did he tell you anything like he liked you?"

"No, He said he liked to dance with me."

"How did he say it?"

"I don't remember just how."

"He wasn't kind of soft, was he?"

"Oh! no. He was a perfect gentleman."

"He must be awful rich."

"I guess so."

"I guess he put more than one ten-spot on the blink."

"Ten-spot?" this questioningly from Asenath.

"Ten dollar bill, I mean."

There was much more talk on the subject before they finished with it. Susan was not quite sure whether Asenath was not withholding from her some indication of special interest in her on Rawlings' part. All of her questioning, however, failed to disclose any, and she was forced to content herself. She could not understand how any young man could devote such attention to a girl unless he was much smitten with her. While she was pondering this question, it occurred to her that perhaps Rawlings had taken Asenath to the concert merely to make some return for his invitation to the McBrides', and thenceforward her serenity was complete.

The two girls accompanied McBride to church. Mrs. McBride rarely went on Sunday mornings, as she had the dinner to prepare. When they reached the church, Susan was on the lookout for Rawlings, but failed to see him. In fact, he had not arrived, but, in spite of his resolution of the night before, he came in shortly after they did and took a seat directly in back of them. Susan happened to turn immediately after he came in, saw him and, at the first favorable opportunity, whispered to Asenath, "He's sitting just behind us."

"Who?" asked Asenath.

"You know, Mr. Rawlings."

It came over Asenath suddenly that Rawlings had come to church to see her. Not that he was not a regular attendant; he was seldom absent from any of the services or other functions. But that he should sit so near to her seemed significant. She could not have offered any valid reason for her belief. His having taken that seat might well have been purely accidental. He may not even have thought that he was choosing a seat which happened to be near hers. She felt somewhat excited, an excitement in which there was a slight feeling of triumph. Susan was more excited than Asenath, but by reason of very different emotions. When the service was over and the congregation had risen to depart, Rawlings greeted them.

McBride acknowledged his greeting and walked off. He wanted to talk about some church matter to one

of the trustees. This left Rawlings with the two girls.

"A fine sermon, wasn't it?" he said.

"Yes," said Asenath, but to tell the truth, not a word of it had penetrated her inner consciousness.

"I don't see how anybody could ever know so much as Mr. Harmon," said Susan. "It's just wonderful. Why, he talks about lots of things I didn't ever know were in books. Lots of it goes clean over my poor—," she paused, for she was just about to say "bean," but caught herself and finished with the right word.

"Yes," said Rawlings, "he has a wonderful mind."

They started to walk down the aisle, still discussing the sermon. Rawlings did most of the talking, Susan a little and Asenath none at all. Asenath was very happy, and, strange to say, Rawlings was perfectly content simply to be with her in spite of the presence of Susan, with whom he was forced, by Asenath's silence, to do all of the talking.

When they reached the entrance, Rawlings spoke to Asenath.

"You seem none the worse for your dissipation of last night," he said, with a smile.

"No, indeed," she answered, "I feel fine." She would have liked to add something about her enjoyment of the evening but it simply wouldn't come to her lips. So instead, she asked:

"How are you feeling this morning?"

"Very well," he answered, delighted at this show of

personal interest. "I'm always well. I suppose you are, too."

"Yes," she answered. "I can't remember the last time I was sick. I guess the last time was when I was a little kid and had the measles or mumps or some such sickness."

Rawlings noted how particularly agreeable her voice was this morning, and how bright and fresh she looked. Asenath found him very pleasant and their conversation extraordinarily interesting.

"Are you going to walk home?" Rawlings asked as he saw McBride approaching them.

"I guess so, we almost always walk. Are you going our way?"

"Why! Yes. For a few blocks anyway."

Susan had been a silent listener during this conversation. But her wits had been busy and as a result she was convinced that Rawlings was infatuated with Asenath. It came to her with a sudden pang. She wanted to be away from them to think it over. She would have been happy to have had the opportunity to miss the Sunday dinner at McBrides', but she had no satisfactory excuse to offer.

When McBride reached them and announced that they had better be going, Susan walked off with him, leaving Asenath to Rawlings. She did this as gracefully as she could, so that he might take it as having been done without design. Rawlings, however, was extremely

self-conscious and felt that his being alone with Asenath would furnish food for gossip. If he had been able to think clearly, it would have occurred to him that Susan's presence would not have altered matters in this respect. He would have been much more comfortable had he left Asenath when McBride came up, but he had not done so. At the same time, he felt a great joy at being with her, which fully compensated for his discomfort. He walked only two blocks with her and their talk was utterly perfunctory, except what passed between them just as he was about to leave her.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself as much as I did last evening," he said.

"I had the loveliest time ever," she answered; "it was perfectly sweet."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. We'll try it again soon, shall we?"

"I'd love to. Thanks ever so much."

"Good-bye," he said, and left without attempting to offer any farewell to the others, who had gone on ahead.

Asenath ran after them. She was delighted. The prospect of another evening such as the last, now that she knew what it meant, was a great joy. Really, she was a lucky girl, and Rawlings was certainly a fine, liberal man. He must like her a lot. Hadn't May Wilson said that he almost never went out with any of the girls. True, there was Laura Mitchell, but then she was an old maid (she was twenty-six years old) and, at any

rate, May had said that he only went out with Laura about once a year and here he was out with her (Asenath) only last night and she already had another invitation. These thoughts and many more of the same tenor passed through her mind as she walked home with her father and Susan. During the meal, she said nothing of the new invitation, but repeated her conversation with Rawlings, at least as much as she could remember, to Susan on the way to Sunday School.

It was a confirmation of what Susan had seen and it added to her trouble. Asenath did not notice her friend's altered demeanor. For once, she was talkative and discussed every aspect of the new invitation, even to the remote possibility of getting some little thing to alter, if ever so slightly, her costume of the evening before. Gradually, Susan recovered her poise. She said to herself "there are others," but she was not convinced, and there remained a depression which made it impossible for her to take her usual lively interest in all that surrounded her.

Rawlings came neither to Sunday School nor to the evening services. He remained at home, complaining of a headache. In fact, he was rather acutely miserable most of the time. He was full of regret at his having been carried away by his desire to see Asenath into publishing his preference for her. Even in the midst of this regret, the desire to see her, to be with her was so strong that it was almost painful. He called himself a

silly ass, and resolved that it must be all over and done with. Philandering of any kind was out of his line. He had no time for frivolity. He must make his way in the world. No, he would not see her again, even if he had to give up his carefully established position in the Second Presbyterian Church and begin afresh elsewhere.

And then, having made this resolution, he felt much better, which is only, in this instance, another way of saying that he felt much worse. What he actually wanted was Asenath, and not to be deprived of her, and what he merely thought he wanted was his independence.

Then, suddenly, he remembered his invitation to Asenath made only this morning. He was so delighted at the thought of this obligation to see her again that he forgot that only a moment before he had been gravely admiring his own firmness in determining not to see her again.

He wondered how soon it would be possible to make the invitation effective.

CHAPTER XIII

RAWLINGS saw Asenath at church on Wednesday evening. He had determined to invite her to accompany him to an illustrated lecture of travel which was to be given on Thursday evening of the next week. His first impulse was to ask her to go to the theatre with him, but he remembered that she had told him her father's strict views with regard to the sinfulness of this form of entertainment. It really made no difference to him where they went. One thing was as good as another provided she was with him.

Of course, he was not always in this mood. Half of the time, he was intensely disgusted with himself. He could not understand why he should be unable to cast aside his desire for this girl. His pride compelled him to look upon his infatuation, he did not call it this, as a merely temporary condition, and was confident that it would soon pass off.

But the rest of the time, he simply was enthralled by his memory of her and did not reason at all.

Asenath accepted his invitation gladly. Lecture, concert or any other form of entertainment was equally welcome to her as long as it meant that a man, and this man, perhaps, rather than any other, was offering her, not merely the luxury she had once tasted, but his companionship, his attention as well. Of course, the

luxury made it all the better. Asenath did not analyze these feelings, she merely experienced them.

They were together only a few minutes on Wednesday evening. On Sunday morning, Rawlings did not come to church at all. In the afternoon, he left without speaking to Asenath, and on Sunday evening she was not there; Mrs. McBride had a headache and wanted Asenath to remain with her.

Rawlings saw Asenath again for a little while on Wednesday evening. He came up to her while she was in the company of Susan and May Wilson. The talk was brief and general, and he came away utterly unsatisfied. He did not like May at all, and he did not enjoy the prospect of having her discuss his attentions to Asenath. He felt as though there had been a number of things which he had wished to mention to Asenath; he could not remember just what they were while he was with her, nor could he do so now. He felt that he had been driven away from her by the presence of the other two girls, particularly May, and he resented her association with them. He could not understand how she, who, even at the first glance, outshone them in every way, could be willing to endure their society at all.

The invitation for the lecture had not included dinner. Rawlings would have liked to have had this additional time with her, but feared that it would seem as though he were "laying it on a bit too thick," as he expressed it to himself. Of course, he called for her in a

taxi (Asenath wondered if he ever walked) and when they reached the hall in which the lecture was to be given, they were very early. This gave them plenty of time for talk.

One of the pauses in their conversation was broken by Asenath.

"Do you know a man named Larned?" she asked.

"Who? Hal Larned?"

"Yes. Harold Prentis Larned. He's a professor in the High School."

"Sure, I know him. We went to school together. But I haven't seen him for a long time. Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At my Uncle William's farm last summer."

"Dear old Hal. He's a queer fish, isn't he?"

"I think he's grand," said Asenath with much more warmth than she had ever shown in Rawlings' presence.

"Oh! he's all right," said Rawlings. "I only meant that he's sort of unusual."

Asenath said nothing, and Rawlings suddenly found that he was very curious to know just how well she knew Larned and how it was that she had been so quick to resent his being called queer. What on earth was coming over him, he wondered, that he should feel disturbed merely because Asenath showed some interest in another man. But this self-questioning did not relieve him of the feeling of irritation. Every now and then,

during the lecture, this idea of Asenath's interest in Larned came back to him and made him vaguely uneasy.

After the lecture was over, he proposed dancing and Asenath readily assented. During the first intermission, he brought up the subject of Larned again.

"You were at your uncle's farm for several weeks, weren't you?" he asked.

"Only one week," she answered.

"Was Larned there all that time?"

"Oh! no. Only one night and the next morning. He was out in an automobile with another man and they had a breakdown right in front of Uncle William's, and they stayed there until the new machinery came."

"I see," said Rawlings. He was much relieved.

There was a short silence which was broken by Asenath.

"Do you know a picture—?" she began and then stopped. She was going to ask whether Rawlings thought she resembled the picture of Madame Vigée le Brun, but she was afraid to attempt the pronunciation of the name.

"Yes," said Rawlings, not in assent but in encouragement so that she might proceed. Anything from Asenath's lips was portentous to him.

"Oh, it's nothing particular," said Asenath, hoping to escape the difficulty she feared.

But Rawlings' interest was thoroughly aroused.

"What picture?" he asked.

"You know—a picture of a lady and her little girl."

"Is it one of the Madonnas?" he asked.

Asenath was very hazy on Madonnas and feared to commit herself.

"She painted it herself," she said; "she was an artist."

"What was her name?"

Asenath did not know how to lie. It was not a matter of ethics with her, but one of technique only.

"It's a French name. I can't say it."

"Try it," he pleaded. He would have been utterly unable to account for his interest.

"You'll laugh at me," she said hesitatingly.

"No, I won't, really."

"It's—it's—I can't say it. Please don't ask me."

"I wish you would try. I won't laugh at you."

Asenath saw no escape. She must make the attempt.

"It's Madame Viggy lee Brun," she said desperately. She pronounced the last part of the name so that it rhymed with "bun." She knew that this was not the way Larned had said it, but it was the best she could do. Really, it made no difference in this case, for Rawlings had never heard the name. Like almost every one else, he had seen many reproductions of the picture, but he had no taste, either natural or acquired, for works of art, and, while he would have recognized the picture immediately, had it been shown him, as one that he had often seen before, it was in his memory negatively only.

The name, then, not communicating anything to him, he went on:

"Tell me about it."

"Do you know what picture I mean?" she asked.

"In a general way, yes," he said, hoping that this would pass.

"Oh! well. It don't make any difference," she said.

But he pressed her.

"It's just foolishness," was the best he could get from her. And then the music began again, which meant dancing instead of talk.

On the way home, he asked her again to tell him about the picture, and at last she said:

"Mr. Larned told me I looked like the lady in the picture and he sent me a copy of it. That's all."

"Will you show it to me?" he asked, wondering just how much impression Larned had made on her. The fact that Larned had sent her the picture seemed very significant to Rawlings, although it is extremely doubtful whether he could have told of what it was significant.

Asenath said she would show him the picture when she reached home if he would come into the house for a minute. So, when the taxi stopped in front of McBrides' house, he got out and went in with her. She had been given the door key, consequently they encountered neither of the other members of the family.

Asenath lit up the parlor and showed him in. Then she went upstairs, to return a minute later with he

picture. She handed it to Rawlings. He recognized it at once as quite familiar, but now, for the first time, was he aware of its beauty and, at the same time, of its likeness to her.

"Stand over here, under the light, so that I can see," he said, and, as he spoke, he unconsciously touched her shoulder with a gentle pressure indicating the direction.

He looked at her fixedly for a full minute, and then again at the picture.

"It's very much like you," he said at length. "She's very beautiful, isn't she?" he asked quite unconscious of the directness of the compliment.

But it was not too direct for Asenath. She was delighted and her smile of pleasure told him that he had made her happy. It did more, it intoxicated him.

"Asenath," he said, using this name for the first time, "you are the most beautiful—"

"Oh! Mr. Rawlings," she began, feeling that it was essential to offer some deprecation.

"Don't call me Mr. Rawlings, please. Call me Jim, won't you?"

"All right," she said, "but—"

"But what?" he asked.

"I don't know. It seems so strange."

"What?"

"That you should be so nice to me."

"Do you think I'm nice to you?"

"You've been just lovely. I don't know why."

"Can't you imagine?" he asked.

"No," she answered, truthfully.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Doesn't it occur to you that I might like you?"

Asenath was silent. She was totally at a loss for an appropriate answer. She looked at him fixedly, with an expression of uncertainty, but above all, a look of helplessness, as though she were depending on him for something or other, she didn't know what. And neither did he. He saw the look and, misunderstanding it, took it to stand for her admiration of his strength. He ascribed her silence to a maidenly modesty which he found utterly charming. He gave her ample opportunity to answer, and then went on:

"You don't dislike me, I hope."

"Oh! No!" she said firmly. She would have liked to say more, but couldn't. Instead she put out both of her hands, a gesture so appealing to Rawlings that, as he took them in his own, he was simply intoxicated with joy. She still looked him straight in the eyes, and he, scarcely knowing what he did, brought his face to hers and kissed her almost abruptly.

"Oh, Asenath, my dear," he said, "you're simply wonderful."

"Am I?" she asked; she was both pleased and puzzled. It had been rather nice to have him kiss her, but, somehow or other, there seemed to be something lacking.

And then Rawlings awoke to a realization of what he had done, taking merely his own standard of conduct into account. He was thoroughly frightened by his own action. However, that action had been accomplished and there was no undoing it.

"Are you glad?" he asked.

"Glad?" she queried.

"Yes; glad at what has come to us," he said rather solemnly.

"Of course I am, but—" She wondered why he was making such a fuss about a mere kiss.

"But what?" he asked.

She thought that she ought to make some kind of protest for form's sake, so she said:

"Do you think it's right?"

"Of course I do," said Rawlings much more stoutly than was warranted by his actual feeling at the moment. "When a man and woman love each other, and there are no real reasons against it, the only thing for them to do after they have declared their love is to marry."

It began to dawn upon Asenath that there was something in the wind besides a mere kiss. It gave her an unusual kind of excitement. It was expectancy, on a grand scale, at the very moment when the issue is to be decided, when success could mean only triumph.

They looked at each other in silence for a brief instant. Asenath was the first to speak.

"But you haven't declared—" She stopped. She was afraid to go on. There was too much risk.

"Not in words, my dear," he answered. "But I kissed you and to me a kiss is a declaration of love. I know that there are men who look upon kissing as of no consequence, but I feel that only engaged people have the right to kiss each other. And so, when I kissed you, it was a declaration of love, in the fullest sense."

As he spoke, certainty came to her and with it a feeling of victory, achievement. She was radiantly happy now. Not in his love, for she had little or no sense of that, nor in any love for him, for of that she had none. It was simply having won, of having been chosen, and it was no less joyful because she had made no effort, nor had even contemplated it as a possibility. What would her folks say; what would Susan say, when she announced her engagement to the most desirable eligible of their acquaintance?

"Are you happy?" he asked again.

"Oh! Yes," she answered. "What will mamma say, I wonder?"

"We'll have to tell her at once," he answered. "I mean tomorrow. I can come up tomorrow evening. Or perhaps you will want to tell her yourself before then."

"No," she said. "I'd much rather you'd tell her. I won't say anything until you're here." She had a fear that she might make some mistake.

"All right, my dear, just as you say. I'll come to-morrow evening. Or rather, this evening, for it's after twelve. I must be going."

Asenath accompanied him to the door. He kissed her again and said:

"Good-night, my love. God bless you."

"Good-night, Mist—Jim."

CHAPTER XIV

ASENATH closed the door after Rawlings' taxi had carried him away, went into the parlor, extinguished the light, gathered up her wraps and went into her room. When she had taken off her hat, and laid it, with her coat, on the bed, she stood before the mirror and looked long and fixedly at her reflection. What she saw pleased her, for she smiled encouragingly at the image. Finally she said, in a low voice:

"How do you do, Mrs. Rawlings?"

She smiled her pleasure at the sound, and, after a parting look at the mirror, she sat down on her rocking chair, to think it all over.

How wonderful it was that it should be she whom Mr. Rawlings loved. She caught herself with a start as she found that she still thought of him as Mr. Rawlings. In reparation, she repeated the idea with the name of Jim substituted for the formal title. It would be grand to be Mrs. Rawlings, to have a fine house, and servants, and fine clothes, and an automobile, and to go to parties and dances.

What would Susan think of her then? Could she have Susan for an associate? Yes; she could and she would. She would never go back on Susan. How about telling Susan in the morning? She would be sure to ask her

all about the evening. Ought she tell her? Could she tell her after she had agreed with Jim not to say anything about it until he came the next evening? Wouldn't Susan be struck when she heard the news? How would it be not to say anything until she had her ring? Would he bring the ring at once? She decided that he would, and then she fell to wondering what it would be like. Oh! she was surely a happy girl.

She sat for a long time and turned these thoughts over and over in her mind. When she heard the clock strike one, she got up, undressed and went to bed. She lay awake for a short time only and then slept like the tired child she was.

But her fiancé did not sleep. All night long he vacillated between extremes of joy and sadness. Whenever he thought of Asenath he was exhilarated, ecstatic, he cared for no one else in the world. With her as his wife, it did not matter what happened. They would be happy. And then he would think of her beauty, of the warmth of her lips as he kissed them, of her soft voice, of her charming smile. Time after time, during the night, he was dropping off to sleep, lulled by these dreams of happiness, when he would awake sharply and be confronted with the difference between his income and the cost of the kind of establishment he thought essential to gentility. And then he thought of the loss of his freedom. Not because he had ever made any special use of it for the accomplishment of anything

in particular, but just because he was going to lose it. But, most of all, he dreaded the necessity of telling his sister of his engagement. He knew her ideas in these matters very well. She had married a man of means and would look upon a marriage into a family like the McBrides with consternation. He had no doubt that Asenath's charm would make itself felt even with her, but he was sure that it would not be enough, and so on through the whole night.

However, in the morning, after his breakfast, he felt better. He was thinking now about Asenath, and not about himself. At his lunch hour, he went to a jeweler and invested about one and a half months' salary in a diamond ring. With that in his possession, he felt that he had burned his bridges behind him and was ready to go on. The die was cast.

As the afternoon wore on, he saw only happiness in store for him. He was not going to be moved by anything that anyone might say or think. After all, he loved Asenath, of that he was as sure as though it were a perfectly easy thing about which to reach a final decision. If they could not have all of the luxuries at first, what did it matter? Besides, Asenath surely was accustomed to living simply. They would have plenty and to spare.

Asenath's day was blissful in the extreme except at lunch time, when she had to meet Susan's searching questioning. Her work, it is true, was not quite up

to her usual high standard, but she was not conscious of it, nor was her superior's attention directed to it. All day long, through her mind echoed and re-echoed "I'm engaged" with hazy pictures of the magnificent life she would lead as the wife of a rich man.

At lunch time, Susan was upon her at once with demands for news of the preceding evening. Asenath did not volunteer any information, but, at the same time, she did not fail to answer any of Susan's questions directly. Her answers were short and were confined strictly to the subject of the question. Consequently, Susan was thrown upon her own imagination entirely. Finally, she said:

"Was that all that happened?" Asenath had only taken her to the point of their coming home in the taxi.

"No," she answered.

"Did he say anything particular in the taxi?"

"No; we just talked."

"What about?"

"I don't remember exactly. Oh! yes, he was telling me about a girl friend of his who's such a fine dancer."

"Did he go right away after he brought you home?"

"No, he came into the house for a little while."

Asenath then told her about showing Rawlings the picture.

"Did he think it looked like you?" Susan asked.

"Yes; and he said it was beautiful."

"He ain't a bit crazy about you, is he?"

This was embarrassing. Asenath was so much in doubt as to what to say that she remained silent. Susan went on:

"Did he say anything about seeing you again?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"He's coming to our house tonight."

"Look out, Queenie; the first thing you know you'll be engaged."

Asenath again was silent, and Susan was sure that something was being withheld from her.

"What's his excuse for coming so soon?" she asked.

"Excuse?"

"Yes, excuse. A fella don't call on a girl every night without some excuse. What's his?"

Asenath again took refuge in silence. She felt that she was bound to secrecy and she could not think of anything that would satisfy Susan's curiosity and at the same time hide the truth. Susan's suspicion that something was afoot became conviction.

"Why don't you come across with the news?" she asked.

"Honest," said Asenath, "I'd love to tell you, but I promised not to say anything yet."

"Oh! Tell me," said Susan. "I'll keep it dark. I'll never let on you told me."

Asenath again took refuge in silence. She was torn by conflicting emotions. She wanted, above all things,

to tell Susan, but she felt that she must not. Finally she said:

"I'll tell you everything tomorrow. You know how it is."

Susan assented, taking Asenath's last statement as an intentional admission of the truth while holding to the letter of her promise. Asenath was relieved, for she thought she had kept her word, and, while she feared Susan might suspect something of the actual facts, it could not be possible for her to imagine anything so wonderful as what really had happened.

Asenath was in some doubt during the afternoon as to the advisability of informing her mother of Rawlings' coming. There had been no chance for any talk between them in the morning, for Asenath had failed to get up immediately when her mother called her and, due to the late hour of her retiring, promptly fell asleep again. When Mrs. McBride finally got her out of bed, she was so hurried that talk was impossible. Asenath knew that her mother would question her minutely with regard to the doings of the evening before, and, if she were given any hint of Rawlings' intention, it would be impossible for Asenath to put her off as she had Susan. Although she turned this problem over in her mind many times, she was unable to reach a decision and devoted her thoughts to more interesting things, among which the engagement ring was easily the most attractive.

The McBrides ate their evening meal early. On this

particular evening Asenath happened to meet her father at the street corner where he alighted from the trolley. As McBride's entrance was the signal for the meal, they sat down almost immediately. It was a rule with the women of the family not to introduce subjects of conversation in McBride's presence. He invariably took the initiative, and when a subject was exhausted, they ate in silence until he offered another. This evening, he asked Asenath if the lecture had been good, what time she had come home, and where they had been during the time which elapsed from the end of the lecture and their return. Asenath answered briefly without, of course, referring to their dancing.

After supper, when it was time to clear up, Asenath asked her mother if she would mind doing the work alone, as she wanted to change her clothes.

Mrs. McBride asked:

"Where are you going?"

"I ain't going anywhere," said Asenath, "but I want to get out of these clothes I've been in all day. You don't mind?"

Mrs. McBride marveled, but said nothing. Since Asenath had been at the Telephone Company, she had been of little help in the house. Mrs. McBride had observed her increasing delinquency in this respect, but had not made any question of it. Asenath usually had the grace to obtain her mother's consent, and that was a distinctly mitigating circumstance.

Mrs. McBride was curious to learn the details of Asenath's evening with Rawlings. She cherished an ambition in the outcome of this friendship and, therefore, hurried with her dishes, with the result that at quarter to eight she was at Asenath's door claiming admission.

She was much surprised to find Asenath in her best dress, engaged in adding some final touches to her toilette.

"What's the idea?" she cried. "What are you getting all dressed up for?"

"What time is it?" asked Asenath, ignoring her mother's question.

"It's nearly eight o'clock. What's going on?"

"Oh! nothing, mamma. Can't I get dressed up if I want to?"

"Is that the way to answer your mother?" inquired that lady with some asperity.

Asenath did not deign to answer. Instead she went on with the arrangement of her collar. Mrs. McBride stood for a little while awaiting a reply to her last inquiry, but, receiving none, and having had considerable experience of the difficulty of making Asenath answer when she was unwilling to do so, remembered her original errand, and dropping into a chair, said amiably:

"Tell me about last night."

Asenath began to tell her mother of the happenings of the evening before. She went into fine detail; detail

of the catalogue variety, and not in any way interpretive. Mrs. McBride interrupted her from time to time with questions which were answered either monosyllabically or not at all. Finally Asenath lost patience and said petulantly:

"You ask me to tell you and then you keep on butting in."

"My! but you're touchy this evening," exclaimed Mrs. McBride.

Just then the front doorbell rang. The two women were silent, listening to McBride's footsteps as he went to open the door. They strained to hear what passed between McBride and the caller, so that they might identify him. A full second after Asenath knew that her expectation had been realized, Mrs. McBride loudly whispered:

"It sounds like Mr. Rawlings."

"It is him," said Asenath.

Just then Mr. McBride called to her to come down, and she went. As she left the room, she said to her mother:

"You'd better dress."

Mrs. McBride was completely mystified. Could it be possible that—she was so much excited that she did not dare to put the question to herself.

"Asenath," she called.

But Asenath was on her way down the stairs and did not answer.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Asenath came into the parlor, where her father and Rawlings were conversing, she was actively aware, perhaps for the first time in her life, that McBride was without his coat. She knew in a general way that he always ate his supper with this garment removed, and she might have known that he would not put it on to answer the ring of the doorbell. It was the sight of him sitting with the well-groomed Rawlings that brought it forcibly to her attention. She had a fearful sense of shame. She wanted to apologize for him but knew not how.

It had shocked Rawlings, too. He had come to the house with joy in his heart. All of his doubts had vanished as the time approached for seeing Asenath and claiming her for his own. His excitement as he rang the doorbell was intense. He could feel the beating of his heart and he experienced a sort of choking which made him take voluntary deep breaths.

When the door opened, the sight of McBride in his shirt sleeves disconcerted him. He wanted to run away. He had come as to a temple in which was enshrined a beautiful goddess, and he entered the house of an ordinary workingman who was innocent of the commonest niceties of etiquette as understood by James Rawlings. Even McBride's fairly civil salutation did

not reassure him. Had it been more cordial, he might have felt easier, but McBride was plainly astonished to see him, and his salutation did not cover the question which was plainly evident in his expression. In fact, he wondered what on earth could have brought Rawlings again so soon.

Their conversation, which lasted for only a few moments, was of the most perfunctory order. Both men were uneasy and did not touch upon either of the two subjects in which they were both interested, Asenath and the church.

As soon as Asenath came into the room, McBride left. This was his etiquette. He had no sooner gone than Rawlings forgot him entirely in his joy at being with Asenath. He came over to her and embraced her with warmth. She accepted the evidence of his affection with complete outward calmness, although inwardly she was excited.

"You look perfectly beautiful this evening," he said at length.

She showed her pleasure plainly. As usual, she would have liked to make some disclaimer but could not think of any. However, she determined to make some return, and said:

"That's a pretty tie you have on."

"Do you think so?" he said, delighted that she had noticed it. He was very particular in the choice of his neckwear and had taken special pains in selecting the one he was wearing this evening.

Neither of them said anything noteworthy until Rawlings asked Asenath in what manner she wished to communicate the news to her parents.

"Oh, I don't know," she said; "what do you think?"

"I suppose you had better ask them to come in here and then we can tell them. Do you want to do the talking?"

"Oh! no," she said. "You do it."

"All right," he answered.

Asenath left the room and during her absence Rawlings tried to give form to the statement he was about to make. Every phrase that came into his mind seemed either too grandiloquent or too ordinary.

Asenath was gone for perhaps two or three minutes, but it seemed much longer to Rawlings. She went first to the dining room, where her father was reading the evening paper.

"Papa," she said, "Mr. Rawlings wants to see you and mamma."

"What for?" he asked.

"He'll tell you. Wait 'til I tell mamma."

"What's he doing here again so soon?" queried Mr. McBride; "he was here only last night."

But Asenath had vanished. She went to her mother's room, where that lady, in obedience to her daughter's command, was completing her toilette.

"Aren't you dressed yet?" asked Asenath, rather sharply.

"I'll be through in a moment. What do you want?"

"Mr. Rawlings wants to see both of you in the parlor. Hurry! Won't you?"

"What's he want?" inquired Mrs. McBride, almost tremulously. Could it be possible—? but again she feared to put the question, even to herself.

"He'll tell you," answered Asenath. "Hurry, please."

She rejoined Rawlings in the parlor. "They'll be here in a moment," she said.

"Do they suspect anything?" he asked.

"No," said Asenath. "They asked what you wanted and I said you'd tell them."

"You don't think they'll make any objection?" he asked.

"Why, what could they object to? They think a lot of you!"

"They might think you're too young."

This was something that had not occurred to Asenath and she had no answer ready. None was needed, however, for at this moment McBride, with his coat on, at the suggestion of his spouse, entered accompanied by the partner of his joys and sorrows.

"Asenath said you wanted to see me," McBride began.

"Yes," said Rawlings. "I wanted to tell you—" He hesitated, the phrase he had selected at the last moment having gone from him suddenly. He looked at Mrs. McBride.

"Yes," said that lady in a tremor of excitement.

"The fact is," went on Rawlings, "I love Asenath, and she loves me, and we'd like your consent. I know she's very young but—"

McBride was plainly surprised. He had not thought of Asenath, to him a mere child, a very young girl, as becoming engaged to be married. Of course, Rawlings' request that he and his wife join them in the parlor had suggested this possibility but he had rejected it. He did not know what to say.

"She's very young," he said finally.

"She's near nineteen," said Mrs. McBride. She could scarce contain her joy.

"We needn't be married right away," said Rawlings. "I'm willing to wait."

McBride turned to Asenath.

"What have you got to say?" he asked.

"Please say 'yes'," she answered.

"Well, James," said McBride after a short pause, "you're a grown man and I guess you know what you're doing. I know you're a God-fearing man and that you've got the right way of living. Asenath is only a child and I didn't think she'd be thinking of getting married for many a year yet, but if you've made up your minds, why, God bless you."

Mrs. McBride would have liked to put in a word here, but she had no opportunity.

"Mr. McBride," said Rawlings solemnly, "I promise,

with God's help, to see that you don't regret taking me for a son-in-law, and you, too," he added to Mrs. McBride.

"My dear son," said that lady with unction. She was anxious for the interview to close so that she might immediately communicate with her sister around the corner.

Rawlings felt in his pocket and produced the box containing the ring. He opened it and placed the ring on the finger of Asenath's outstretched hand.

"Oh! Isn't it grand?" she asked her mother.

"It's gorgeous," said Mrs. McBride with enthusiasm.

Mr. McBride felt that he was no longer needed. Transports of any kind were unpleasant to him. He noted with satisfaction the size of the stone, taking it as an indication of the affluence of his prospective son-in-law.

"You and Asenath'll have lots to talk about," he said, "so we'd better be going. Come, mother," and they left the room.

When they were gone, Rawlings began talking about the future which he envisaged. He spoke of the work they would do together in the church, of their helpfulness to each other, of their mutual trust. He even considered the prospect of children and his ideas on their upbringing. Asenath listened with apparent attention, but really she was not more than half conscious of what he said. She was in the clouds; the ring upon her finger, the tangible evidence of her victory, her established position, engaged most of her

thought. At that, she followed Rawlings' words closely enough to enable her to put in an occasional word or two, which was all that was necessary.

However, when he took up the subject of the sort of house they would be able to afford and the economy they would be compelled to practice, Asenath's active interest was aroused.

"You see, my dear," he said, "as things stand now, I have only my salary and a very small income from my grandmother's estate. Of course, we won't marry right away, but even then, I can scarcely hope for any great increase in my salary, and the income from the estate won't change at all. We shall have to live very carefully."

This was very unpleasant news to Asenath. Living carefully had always been her portion. What was the use of getting married if she had to live very carefully? How about the servants? And the automobile? She would have liked to speak her mind to Rawlings, but she could not do it. He noticed her pre-occupation and was disturbed by it. He wondered what could have been the cause, and paused for a moment to give her the opportunity to speak. But Asenath said nothing, and Rawlings had no question ready for her. So, taking her left hand in his right, as they were sitting side by side on an old davenport, he resumed his talk. As he did so, Asenath was again made conscious of her ring and was once more visibly cheerful.

"Of course," he went on, "three thousand dollars a year isn't what you would call poverty, although it isn't very much."

"Three thousand dollars!" exclaimed Asenath, delighted. "That's an awful lot of money." To her the sum seemed simply fabulous. She was used to incomes that were computed at so much a week. Sixty dollars in one week would also have appeared enormous to her, although it would have seemed infinitely less than three thousand a year. She knew her father received twenty-five dollars a week and that he was very proud of it. She was thoroughly reassured.

Rawlings saw her pleasure and was much eased thereby. He felt that he had been quite right in his idea that Asenath would not expect even as much as he could give her. How sweet she was in her artless simplicity; what a wonderful woman she would become under his guidance.

Being now perfectly comfortable in his mind with regard to their financial outlook, he continued the same topic.

"Some day I'll come in for quite a big fortune. I don't know just how much, but more than I'll ever want. It's money that was left to me by my grandfather. My Uncle George out in California has the use of it during his life and when he dies it comes to me. But there's no use counting on that for a good many years, for Uncle George is one of those old fellows who'll live forever."

But Asenath had no interest in any such remote contingency. Beyond three thousand dollars there was no counting for her; it was terra incognita.

Rawlings paused and, leaning over, kissed her. "Are you happy?" he asked tenderly.

"Oh! Yes," she said with emphasis. "Tell me about your sister."

This was an unfortunate subject for Rawlings and the last thing he wanted to think about. For the moment, he had completely forgotten the necessary discussion of his engagement with her. He knew it would be an ordeal and, just now, he wanted to be perfectly happy. However, he was compelled to put the best face possible on the matter. There was no advantage whatever in advising Asenath of the resistance he expected.

"She's a very fine woman," he said. "I'm sure you'll be ever so fond of each other when you get to be well acquainted. She goes out a good deal with some pretty swell people, and I don't imagine that we'll meet a whole lot after we're married. Raymond Dunne, that's my brother-in-law, comes of an old family here who are right in it. They've all got piles of money. Raymond's family are all Episcopalians and when Mary married him, she naturally went to his church. Did you ever see her? She used to come to our church before she was married."

"I don't think so," said Asenath. "Is she pretty?"

And so on and so on. Empty as the conversation would be to an outsider, to the participants it was interesting in the highest degree. Rawlings did most of the talking and did not notice that he did so. Asenath's expression told him plainly how enjoyable she found the new experience. She listened with an air of intentness that was most flattering; she accepted his caresses without either resistance or complete abandonment and, consequently, when he left her at about half-past ten, he was in the clouds in the fullness of his joy.

He had arranged that she was to call him on the telephone the next day, Saturday, early in the afternoon. Every detail of this appointment had been gone over thoroughly, so that there would be no mistake made on either side. They were then to arrange for their next meeting.

Asenath found her mother awaiting her in her room after Rawlings' departure. Mrs. McBride wanted details and she heard them, at least to the extent that direct questioning induced them. Consecutive, orderly narrative was not one of Asenath's strong points.

CHAPTER XVI

SUSAN had no doubt whatever that Asenath and Rawlings were engaged, or, if not actually engaged, were upon the point of being so. She was quite surprised, now that she knew her own ambition to be hopeless, to find that she was not really unhappy. In fact, she was enjoying the relief that invariably attends the resolution of doubt into certainty. She was not in love, had never been in love, with Rawlings. He had represented "high society" to her. Naturally he had attracted her; he was of the opposite sex and much better than the average. In her eyes, he was rich, educated and distinguished, and she would have been happy to have won some of his attention. She had never seriously contemplated the possibility of marriage. That was entirely too remote.

Now that it was evident that he was to marry Asenath, Susan saw that her friendship with the latter must be maintained at all costs. She saw that, as a friend of Asenath, she would have just the opportunity she desired to make acquaintances of the right sort of people. Susan was undoubtedly a climber, but who is not to some extent?

Saturday was a half holiday for both of the girls. Asenath's engagement ring had created some comment on the part of the girls who worked on either side of her.

Rumor travels quickly, and it was only a few minutes after it was first noticed that news of the ring reached Susan. She was somewhat surprised that the affair had moved so quickly and her curiosity as to the details was at a high pitch.

The moment she was free, she ran to the dressing room, where Asenath was awaiting her.

"Oh! Queenie!" she cried, "I'm so glad."

And she really was. She kissed Asenath with fervor.

"Tell me all about it," she said.

"Ain't it a beautiful ring?" asked Asenath, holding out her hand.

"It sure is some rock," said Susan enthusiastically. "Go on, dearie, tell me all about it. I'm just crazy to hear what's been doing."

"Oh! There's lots to tell," said Asenath. "It'll take me all afternoon. But first, I've got to 'phone Jim. I promised. What time is it?"

"It's five after one."

"Gee! I'm late already. I promised sure to call him at one sharp. He'll be mad."

"Well, go on. I'll wait here."

"No, you come with me."

Asenath quickly had Rawlings on the telephone. At the sound of her voice he brightened up and became very cheerful. He had spent a very miserable morning. But of that hereafter. He arranged to call for her at three o'clock to take her out walking. He kept her at

the telephone for fully five minutes, during all of which time Susan was an interested listener. It was quite possible for her to imagine Rawlings' part in the conversation.

Asenath asked her to come home with her and Susan readily consented. As they walked up the street, she began her account.

"I was just crazy to tell you all about it yesterday," she began, "but Jim thought I'd better not tell anybody until after he'd been up to the house to talk to mamma and papa, because, the night before, they were both in bed sound asleep, and it all happened so sudden that I guess we just didn't know what to do."

"Aren't you just crazy about him?" Susan inquired.

"Yes, he's just grand to me," answered Asenath.

"How did he propose?" asked Susan.

Asenath thought for a moment. Then she said:

"He didn't propose at all. He just kissed me and—" She stopped. She was in doubt as to the advisability of telling Susan that she had attached no particular importance to the kiss. As she reached the decision not to tell her, Susan's impatience to hear more caused her to say:

"And what?"

"And then he asked me if I was glad we were engaged and I told him 'yes, I was,' and then we talked about lots of things; I don't remember what all."

"That's a funny way to propose. How did he come to kiss you? Where were you?"

"In our parlor. He came in to see the picture—I told you all about that yesterday."

"I know, but what came in between?"

"He said 'did I like him,' and I said 'yes'."

"And what then?"

"Then he kissed me."

"Right off? Where were you?"

"I told you 'in the parlor'."

"I know you were in the parlor, but were you sitting down and was he sitting down or what?"

"We were both standing up."

"How did you come to be so close together?"

"I don't remember. We were talking and he took my two hands and then he kissed me."

Susan was not to be denied, however, and went on with her questions until she had built up the situation, mostly, it is true, out of her own imagination. Then followed other questions concerning the interview between Rawlings and the senior McBrides, and by the time they were answered they had reached home and their talk was interrupted until after lunch. It was then resumed in Asenath's room. Susan remained with her friend until a few minutes before three and then departed.

It had been Rawlings' intention to announce his engagement to his sister when he arrived home on Friday night, should she still be visible. Ordinarily, this might have been expected, but this evening it happened that she had gone to bed early.

It was not a disappointment to Rawlings to be compelled to postpone his announcement. On the contrary he was delighted. He had spent a very happy evening and still felt the thrill which Asenath's presence invariably brought to him. He did not want to break the spell.

In the morning, however, he allowed his brother-in-law to leave for his office alone, using some pretext or other, and, as soon as he found himself alone with his sister, they were still at the breakfast table, he said to her:

"Mary, I have some news for you."

"Yes," she answered; "I hope it's good news."

"The best possible," said Rawlings. "I'm engaged to be married."

"Engaged!" she cried, putting down the spoon she had just taken up. "You?"

"Yes, engaged. Why not?"

"But you've never given the least hint. I should never have guessed it. Who's the girl?"

"Miss McBride."

"McBride? I don't know any McBrides. Who are they?"

"Don't you remember the McBride who attended our church—our old church, you know?"

"But you can't mean them. Why, they're very ordinary people, aren't they?"

"I guess you might call them ordinary, but they're very fine people for all that," he answered stoutly.

"I don't remember their daughter. Or is there more than one?"

"She's an only child."

"When I said they were ordinary people," she resumed, after her interruption of herself, "I didn't mean anything—well, anything derogatory to their characters or anything like that. But if I have any recollection of Mr. McBride at all, it is that he was an honest, well-meaning, religious man, perhaps even a little bigoted, but for all that, a good man, one worthy of respect. But not a person to associate with. He's uneducated, ignorant and, as far as manners go, I suppose—well, I won't hurt your feelings. Is it actually an engagement?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes, it is," he answered firmly. "There's no doubt that most of what you say about Mr. McBride is quite true. I know it as well as you do, but that doesn't alter the fact that I'm dead in love with Asenath, and I wouldn't care if her father was the devil himself. I want her, and I've got her and I'm glad of it."

"Well, James, if you feel that way about it, I'm sure I wish you joy. It's by no means the sort of choice I would have had you make, but it's your life and you ought to be old enough to know your own mind. By the way, how old is—what did you say her name was?"

"Asenath. She's nearly nineteen."

"Tell me about her. How long have you known her?"

"I've known her in a way for a couple of years, just

through meeting her at church, you know. I don't believe I ever spoke a dozen words to her at one time until a couple of weeks ago. Then, after I had been to McBrides' one evening for dinner, I wanted to make some return, and I invited her to a concert. I expected to be bored, but instead, I enjoyed myself more than I ever had in my whole life. She is so sweet, so simple, so good that it's just—well, refreshing. After that, I simply couldn't get her out of my mind, and the other night, without any intention in the world, I proposed to her and she accepted. Last night her parents consented, although they thought she was too young."

"She is, much too young."

"We won't be married immediately," he said, getting up out of his chair.

"I've heard that before. I don't doubt that that's your present intention. However, as I said before, it's not my affair and I surely wish you every happiness. You won't mind your old worldly-wise sister croaking a bit. I am afraid your fall was a bit too sudden. I don't know the girl, of course, and won't make up my mind about her in advance. I'm sure I hope she's everything you want her to be. When can we come to see her?"

"I'm going to see her this afternoon and I'll let you know. Thanks very much, Mary; I'm sure you'll approve when you know her better."

"We won't discuss my approval just now. If I can give it, I'll be very happy. You know what my feeling is."

He kissed her and left for the office. He was very uncomfortable all morning. He felt that his sister rather pitied him; that she looked upon him as a boy who had not had sufficient self-control to determine so momentous a matter on the basis of reason. He tried to justify his action by argument with himself, but failed miserably. All that stood out was Asenath's beauty, her softness, her desirability, and they enthralled him whenever he would let his memory dwell on them. Most of the time, however, he felt wounded in his most vulnerable spot, his pride. He was not able to enjoy his ordinary feeling of complete adequacy to meet any situation. He was no longer actively concerned with regard to the financial aspect. That had sunk into the background. Still, it formed a part of his discomfort, although he was not conscious of it. Once or twice he found himself wishing that he were out of the whole affair, but, immediately upon the formation of the idea, he felt it was disloyal, and despised himself because it had even occurred to him.

However, when Asenath telephoned him at a little after one, all of these distressing reflections were dispelled by the mere sound of her voice, and he went to his lunch joyfully and ate with his ordinary good appetite.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Rawlings reached McBrides' house, he found Asenath ready to start immediately. He exchanged a few words with Mrs. McBride, who invited him to take supper with them, which he agreed to do, and then they set off.

They took the trolley to the city park and then began their walk. The day was beautiful. There was just a touch of frost in the air which added zest to their enjoyment of the walk. The trees still retained much of their foliage, brilliant in its striking mixture of colors. Asenath saw this beauty and felt it deeply, but Rawlings saw only Asenath. Their conversation was devoted mainly to themselves, that is, Rawlings, who did almost all of the talking, told her of his interests, his occupation, his likes and dislikes, and so on indefinitely. Asenath was interested in everything he had to say and showed her interest plainly. Rawlings found it was so easy to talk to her that he did not notice that she furnished almost none of the conversation. It is true that occasionally she would ask a simple question, but that was all.

At length he came to a description of his home life with his sister and then he remembered that he was to make an engagement for her to call on Asenath. He asked her when it would suit her to have them.

Asenath was not sure and suggested that they had

better talk it over with her parents. She did not tell him that she stood rather in awe of Mrs. Dunne and would have preferred not seeing her at all for the present. Besides, it seemed more fitting that the McBrides call on her, in view of her superior position. But when Rawlings mentioned his sister's call on the McBrides as the next step, Asenath accepted that as final, although she could not understand the reason.

When this matter had been temporarily disposed of, they walked in silence for a while. Rawlings broke it by asking:

"Now tell me, my dear, what do you do in the evenings?"

"Oh! Nothing much. Sometimes I sew, or I help mamma with the house work, or we just sit around and talk."

"Do you read much?"

"No, not much."

"Are you fond of reading?"

"I never have any time to read."

"Not at all?"

"Sometimes I look at some magazines."

"Which ones?"

"The Ladies' Home Journal and the Delineator."

"Don't you ever read any books?"

"No, we haven't got any except some old books of papa's. I don't think I'd care much for them."

"Have you ever read any of Dickens?"

"No."

"Thackeray?"

"No, I haven't read anything. I guess I'm awful dumb."

"Oh! No, you're not, but you've never had any chance."

"That's so," said Asenath, much relieved.

"I'm going to send you some books and you'll find out what a great pleasure there is in reading."

"Oh! That'll be lovely."

Rawlings, it may be observed, had no taste for literature beyond the most popular variety of fiction. Indeed, he read very little of that. When he was about sixteen, he had been compelled to read Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Vanity Fair and Ivanhoe. This had been such a great and burdensome task at the time that, looking at it in retrospect, he rather felt that he had fairly well covered all of the so-called standard English fiction.

As they approached the exit to the park, he asked her suddenly:

"Are you sure you love me?"

"Yes," she answered; "you've been just grand to me."

Somehow or other the adjective rather jarred on him, but a look at her beautiful face and her earnest expression of sincerity restored his equilibrium. He made a mental note that, a little later, he would get her out of the habit of expressing herself thus. He went on:

"But, my dear, that isn't what I mean by love. I love you just because you're you, because when I'm with you, I'm perfectly happy, and when I'm away from you, I'm always wishing to be with you. Is that the way you feel about me?"

"Yes," said Asenath, "but I couldn't say it like that. I just feel things and when I want to say them, they just won't come out."

Asenath believed herself in love with Rawlings. In the first place she liked him. She enjoyed his evident admiration; she was delighted with her position as his fiancée; he entertained her. In short, he was a man who paid her homage and it would be impossible to conceive that this could fail to delight her. She liked to be with him, but she was quite content to be away from him, provided she had something else to do that interested her. For instance, this very afternoon, she had enjoyed her talk with Susan immensely. She was very fond of Susan and she had had an intense pleasure in the flattering interest Susan had shown in her friend's good fortune. When Rawlings had told her how he felt, it seemed to her that her own emotion must be what he described. But, even if this was the case, and it wasn't, his words were the first intimation to her of what she thenceforward believed was her own sentiment.

They returned to McBrides' shortly before the time of their evening meal. As soon as they were in the house

and Asenath was released from Rawlings' embrace, she said:

"You don't mind if I run up to change my dress so's I can help mamma with the dishes after supper?"

Rawlings assured her that he thought it was fine of her to be so thoughtful of her mother. He was still under the intoxication which embracing her had brought upon him, and saw her as almost superhuman. He walked up and down the parlor while she was gone. He was much too happy to be able to sit still.

Asenath returned sooner than he had expected. He noted that she had not changed her dress, which she explained by the statement that her mother would not hear of her helping her this evening.

"You are certainly devoted to each other, aren't you?" Rawlings asked.

Asenath looked at him before replying. "You wouldn't think so sometimes," she said. "She gets awful cranky."

Rawlings felt that a false note had been struck. But his sensation was momentary only. She smiled at him and went on:

"You ought to hear the way she goes on when she gets mad. But it don't last long with her. She gets over it in a few minutes. And then she is just as sweet as sugar."

This seemed to Rawlings as rather lacking in filial respect, but he made no comment. He would not have known how. There was nothing definitely disrespectful

in what she had said. He tried to seize upon the reason for his critical attitude but it eluded him.

A moment later, Mrs. McBride called them to supper. During the meal, Rawlings did most of the talking, addressing himself principally to McBride, who answered him from time to time with gravity and much positiveness. It was arranged that Mr. and Mrs. Dunne were to come either Monday or Tuesday evening, whichever they found more convenient.

At the conclusion of the meal, Rawlings and Asenath went into the parlor. They talked about many things, the same things, in fact, that they had discussed before at each of their meetings. For a large part of the time Rawlings held Asenath's hand. He was perfectly blissful. He had no sense of the fact that their talk was an almost exact repetition of their former conversations. Actually, they talked to justify their presence in each other's company and not because they were particularly interested in the subjects that they discussed.

At about eight o'clock, Asenath wanted a change. She did not know exactly what, but she was conscious of a certain amount of restlessness. It would be much too strong a statement to say that she was beginning to be somewhat bored, but, although she did not know it, it was in that general direction. Their talk had been punctuated by silences which gradually increased in length.

Finally, Asenath ended one quite long pause in the conversation by saying:

"Let's do something."

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Oh! Anything."

Rawlings thought for a few minutes. Then he said:

"Do you care for moving pictures?"

"I love them."

"Have you an evening paper?"

"Papa's got one. I'll get it."

Asenath left and returned shortly with the paper and together they decided on the picture they wanted to see. This means that Rawlings selected one that he thought would please them and she consented readily. Any one would have suited her.

They saw the picture, and then they went to a cafe where they danced and came home in a taxi. It was a highly successful evening. Asenath had enjoyed the picture, which happened to be a particularly stupid thing; she loved to dance, and the taxi was luxury in the extreme. And Rawlings had been in the fever of delight which her presence always caused him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Dunnes called on the McBrides on Tuesday evening. The visit was comparatively short and very satisfactory to everyone concerned except Rawlings, who was self-conscious to a degree. He was more uncomfortable than he had ever been in his life. He could not help observing the contrast between the bearing of the two families, but it appeared to him to be much greater than it really was.

It was a satisfactory visit for the Dunnes because it convinced them that their objections to the match were fully justified. They would both have said that it would have been a great pleasure to have found themselves in error, not as to the rule, of course, but in this particular case. That applied to the parents. As for Asenath, they were both quite charmed. She was beautiful as always, and bore herself with great modesty, so it appeared to them. They set down her silence, which she maintained except when a question was put to her directly, to girlish shyness.

On the way home they agreed that it was bad enough for James to marry into a family like that, but, at any rate, the girl was young, seemed to be very modest and unquestionably could be taught. And she undoubtedly was a beauty. Nobody could find fault with James' taste in this respect. It was a pity, however, that he

hadn't picked out somebody who could have been more of a help to him.

Each of the three McBrides had a different opinion of their visitors. The head of the family was rather contemptuous, that is, as contemptuous as a man of his kind could be of a solid citizen like Raymond Dunne. McBride made no comment to the rest of the family, but inwardly he felt that he had been patronized, and he resented it.

Mrs. McBride was delighted. To her they stood for the social glory in which her daughter was to shine. She had mistaken what was simply good manners on the part of Mary Dunne for actual interest in them and their affairs. Mary's tact had confined the conversation largely to matters which concerned the McBrides. She had talked about the Second Presbyterian Church and its congregation in the days when she was a member of it.

Asenath was much relieved after the first few minutes of the visit. She found that she need not stand in awe of her prospective sister-in-law. Mary had come to her at once when she had come into the room and had kissed her in the most affectionate manner. She had won Asenath completely by her tactful simplicity.

After they had gone, and Rawlings and Asenath were alone, he asked her:

"How did you like Mary?"

"I think she's lovely."

"I'm glad you like her. I'm sure she likes you, too. I could tell from the way she acted towards you. Is she anything like what you expected?"

"I don't know. I was kind of scared. I thought she'd be kind of—I don't know just what. But—"

"But what?"

"She's just sweet."

It had been arranged that Asenath was to come to Dunnes for dinner on the following Thursday. Asenath looked forward to the occasion with the keenest pleasure. To her it was her formal entrance into the world of wealth and fashion. Strange to say, she was not at all impressed by what almost any other girl would likely have considered her good fortune. This aspect did not come into her mental vision. She was given neither to introspection nor to calculation. It was ever so much easier just to let things happen. If she had had any philosophy, she might have justified her course on the basis of fatalism or perhaps merely blind chance. But she had no philosophy.

On Tuesday evening on her return home, she found a fine edition of Thackeray's works awaiting her. They were beautiful books and Asenath was delighted to be the owner of so distinguished a gift. Rawlings had enclosed a note in which he recommended that she begin by reading "Vanity Fair." So, after she was dressed, and all ready for the expected visitors, she took "Vanity Fair" from the set and began to read it.

She was much surprised to find it completely uninteresting. She had expected, from Rawlings' remarks of the previous Saturday, to find it as absorbing as a "movie." She was mystified at first by the allusions and wondered why she could not understand them. The book was certainly written in English, there were comparatively few words she did not comprehend; it told about school-girls at a boarding school, that much was clear, but what was the author trying to say? She could not determine, but she read on, hoping that it would become clear later on. Presently she found that she was thinking of something quite removed from the matter in the page before her, although she was still mechanically reading the words. So she began again at the very beginning and had read three pages before her guests arrived.

During the evening, after the Dunnes had gone, she thanked Rawlings for the books. He asked her whether she had looked into them and she answered that she had just glanced at the first few pages of "Vanity Fair."

"Did you read up to where Becky Sharp threw the dictionary out of the carriage window?" he asked. This was one of the few incidents of the book which had remained in his memory.

"No," said Asenath, "I looked at only two or three pages." Throwing the dictionary out of a carriage window was something she could understand. That appealed to her as humorous and she concluded that

she would enjoy the book after she got over the first few pages.

On Thursday evening, Rawlings called for her at seven o'clock, this time in Raymond Dunne's fine limousine. As Asenath sank into the luxurious upholstery, she was conscious of the contrast between this and the taxis to which she had recently become accustomed. How comfortable it was, she thought, not only to be whisked from place to place without the necessity of going into the dirty streets, or the even dirtier trolley cars, but in such a conveyance as this. Asenath felt a great sense of physical well-being, she was at complete peace with herself and the world and she accepted the pressure of Rawlings' hand on hers without thought of its implication, and also without any return pressure.

The dinner seemed to Asenath quite formal, although it differed in no respect from the ordinary service of the Dunnes' meals. She made no errors. She was in no hurry, was not at all nervous and did exactly what she saw her hostess do. She even drank a little white wine, although she found it disagreeable. The meal was a simple one with regard to the quantity and variety of the food. Asenath enjoyed herself thoroughly. She was seated between Rawlings and Dunne, and the latter kept up a running fire of banter which was quite within her understanding. She showed her appreciation mostly in smiles, but occasionally she laughed, never loudly, however.

After dinner, Mary took Asenath to her own room. Asenath was immensely impressed by the quiet elegance of all that she had seen in the Dunne household, but the intimate quality of charm in the decoration of this room appealed to her with particular force. To live in such surroundings was worth while. She wondered if such decoration was very costly; whether it would be within her reach when she was married.

Mary motioned to a comfortable chair in which Asenath seated herself and observed her prospective sister-in-law go to a drawer in her dressing table and take therefrom a little package. Mary handed the package to Asenath, saying:

"It's only a little thing I got for you today."

"For me? Oh! Thank you. Shall I open it now?"

"Of course."

It proved to be a fine, but beautifully simple la valliere. Asenath was delighted. She showed her pleasure so plainly that comment was unnecessary.

"It's grand," she said. "Gorgeous."

"Put it on," Mary directed, and Asenath, getting up from her chair, went over to the mirror and placed it on her neck. She looked at her reflection for quite a long time, Mary watching her with pleasure.

"You're so good to me," said Asenath at length.

"It adds to your appearance, doesn't it?"

"It's lovely."

"Come over here, my dear, let's get acquainted.

We're going to see a great deal of each other and there's nothing like a good start."

Asenath sat down beside her. She was quite at a loss for the proper answer, so she made none. Instead, she took Mary's hand and fondled it.

"You're very happy, aren't you?" asked Mary.

"Oh! yes. I'm awfully happy."

"And James is the finest man in the whole world, isn't he?" asked Mary.

This was something that had not occurred to Asenath. However, there was nothing to do but assent.

"He's just wonderful," said Asenath. She was going to say something about his generosity, but the right words wouldn't come.

"He's a very fine fellow," said Mary. "Even though I'm his sister and supposed to be prejudiced in his favor, I can say that with a clear conscience. Still, he's like other people, he has his ups and downs. You know the sun doesn't shine every day. And marriage isn't altogether a party. Sometimes it's a pretty serious business. I suppose you realize that."

Asenath did not know what to say. This was all new to her. Her only conception of her own marriage was with regard to clothes, a pretty house, the luxury of servants, amusement. She wished with all her soul that she could say something in answer to Mary, but it would not come. So Mary went on:

"Then there's another thing to consider—babies.

They're the great blessing, but they're a burden as well. And the woman's part is the serious one. It's scarcely fair, I suppose, to talk of these things to you yet, but I want both of you to be happy, very happy, and your best chance is to know a little of what's before you. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Asenath. But she said it with her lips only and Mary saw that the real meaning had not reached her. She continued:

"I'm glad you agree with me, because I know. I've been 'through the mill,' as they say. You've got to love a man much better than you love yourself if you want to get anything out of marriage. You've got to be able to get a good deal of your joy out of sacrifice. You think James is 'wonderful,' you say. That's now, when he's in a sort of craze concerning you; when you seem almost holy to him. Do you think, when you've lived together for a few years, and the novelty's worn off, that you'll think he's wonderful when he flies in a temper just because the coffee's cold? It's got to be a pretty thoroughgoing love that will pull you through, and you want to be sure that he's the man you must have to make you happy, no matter what comes."

She paused and looked at Asenath intently awaiting some answer. But there was nothing in Asenath's mind to fit the occasion. She could not speak, the words would not come. She still had Mary's hand in her own. Suddenly she put it to her mouth and kissed it.

"Why do you do that?" asked Mary.

"Oh! I just love you," answered Asenath, "you're so good to me and I'm so awful dumb that I just have to sit here and listen to you talk so lovely to me and I can't say one word."

Asenath was on the verge of tears. Mary saw it and, with keen intuition, recognized exactly the sort of person with whom she was dealing. Asenath's helplessness appealed to her as nothing else could.

"Don't say that, my dear. You must remember that you're a very young girl, and it's not expected that you have thought about all these things. I was wrong to talk about them to you. At any rate, we all have to learn from our own experience. Warnings aren't worth much. Now let's talk about other things."

Mary's tone was kindness itself, and it, rather than her words, comforted Asenath completely. Her face regained its customary composure. She now felt entirely at ease with Mary; she had the sense of being with a staunch friend, one upon whom she might always count with confidence.

"What'll we talk about?" she asked brightly.

"Tell me where you got that pretty dress."

Asenath was altogether at home on this topic, and became almost voluble. When she left Dunnes' with Rawlings, she was happy in the belief that she had a good friend in Mary.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Rawlings returned after escorting Asenath to her home, he was surprised to find his sister up and evidently awaiting him. She greeted him affectionately.

"Do you want to go to bed immediately?" she queried.

"Why do you ask?" he returned.

"If you don't mind," she answered, "I'd like to have a little talk with you." There was no mistaking her manner. It was clearly reassuring. Had it been otherwise, he would undoubtedly have found some excuse to evade what would have been a somewhat disagreeable discussion. He had just left Asenath and was still under the spell of her charm. He sat down.

"I'm not sleepy," he said, "go on."

"James," she began, "I got to know Asenath very well this evening, and I'm perfectly sure that you have chosen well. I believe she will make you a good wife. After all, that's the important thing, isn't it?"

Somehow or other, Rawlings could not have told why, he found her words unsatisfying. Of course, nothing but assent was possible.

"Don't think," she went on, "that I believe she's perfect, or that your life together will be one continuous dream of happiness. She's very beautiful, she reminds me of someone, I can't think who it may be; she's

modest, her manner is quiet and dignified, and if, as is probable, she has never had any experience of the niceties of life, at least she doesn't give herself away. She seems to have good taste, just naturally. Did you notice her behavior at the table this evening? Why, you'd think she was used to dining out every evening."

Rawlings was vaguely dissatisfied. He enjoyed Mary's praise of Asenath, but he feared her analysis. He did not want to hear of any imperfections. He knew that they must be present, but he felt that he could not discuss them. To admit them would hurt his pride, he would feel it as a reflection on his judgment, his own worth. He did not recognize it, but this was the fact.

"She shows her good taste in her dress," continued Mary. "Do you know that all of her clothes are made at home by her mother and herself? She gets the ideas from the fashion papers, but it's wonderful how sure her taste is. It's just natural."

"She certainly dresses well," said Rawlings. "She always looks fine, never overdressed."

"Yes, I can imagine that she looks just as well in the clothes she wears at her work."

"I've never seen her then, but she always looks just as well as she did this evening."

"For so young a girl, it's rather remarkable. She's not quite nineteen, and it isn't fair to expect too much of her. She's had no social or educational advantages whatever. I don't know what her friends are like."

"They're not much. You know the kind."

"Of course I do. And her parents are—well, the less said the better."

"I know what they are, too. And after we're married, I don't propose to see any more of them than I can help."

"I don't blame you. But, after all, that's a minor matter. What I want to talk about is Asenath herself. James, I want you to understand what I'm going to say in the spirit in which I say it, that is, in the spirit of the utmost kindness. Asenath is a beautiful girl, she's good, she has fine taste and everything like that, but she's not a bit clever. I don't mean the cheap smartness which passes with most people as cleverness. I mean— Oh! it's awfully hard to say just what I mean, but I suppose that I can put it that her understanding is limited to rather simple ideas."

Rawlings made a gesture of protest.

"Wait, James," she went on. "I know it's not fair to judge on such short acquaintance, but I'm convinced that my judgment—I guess it isn't really judgment, but intuition. Well, my intuition, then, tells me this. But I'm almost persuaded that this is an advantage rather than the opposite. She's very young, you have the opportunity to make almost anything of her within her ability. One thing is sure, if you follow the right course, you'll be very happy. But don't crowd her, study her and study yourself. You have every

incentive, you love her and you can make her love you with complete devotion."

"She loves me now," said Rawlings. What his sister had said to him concerning Asenath had completely upset him. As she spoke, he felt the elemental truth of her words, but he would not admit it. He was ill at ease, discontented with the whole affair.

"In a way, yes," said Mary. "But she might very well not understand what love means. Just think what you represent in the way of social possibility to a girl in her circumstances. Don't you see that it is quite probable that your attentions have flattered her to the point where she mistakes her admiration for you and her gratitude for love? I don't doubt that she will love you, and devotedly too, when she has gone a little further, but now I'm not at all sure."

"I'm sure," answered Rawlings, stoutly, "and I don't think you're right when you say she's stupid. She's young and she's inexperienced, that's all. And besides, she feels strange with you. When we're alone together she talks—why, you ought to hear her ideas."

Rawlings got no further. He was almost angry and feared that he might become thoroughly so were the discussion protracted.

"All right," said Mary, "I hope I'm wrong in everything that makes her less than you want her to be. But don't be annoyed with me. I'm so much interested that I want to help you all I can. You know that, don't you?"

"Certainly," he answered. "And thank you very much for your gift to Asenath. She was perfectly delighted with it. You'd be all puffed up if I told you all she said about you. Good night."

He kissed her and went off to bed, but, once there, he wooed sleep in vain.

As he tossed on his bed until almost dawn, he considered and reconsidered his position, and then considered it again. He alternated between his desire for Asenath, which controlled him whenever, for a moment, he thought of her, and his wish to be out of the whole affair. For it had come to that. He was afraid. His sister's well meant words had had an effect exactly opposed to her intention. He could not specify just what he feared, he knew only that he was unhappy; that his position as Asenath's fiancé made him feel apologetic. He could answer every objection to the match that had been offered or that had occurred to him, and could answer it satisfactorily, but still the feeling of the necessity for explanation, for outward justification, was upon him.

All objections or criticisms but one could be disposed of. And that was Mary's opinion that Asenath was not clever. He told himself that she might not be vivacious or voluble, but he refused to admit that her quiet demeanor was any evidence of a lack of intellectual quality. She was untrained, uneducated, if the word was necessary, but that was all.

How beautiful she was! What wonderful charm in her expressive smile! What grace in her least movement! He conjured her before him as he lay with closed eyes, and again he was rapturously in love with her, oblivious to every feeling but the desire for possession of her.

And from this ecstacy he would sink into despair. He wanted to be out of it; he wanted to be free. He would go to her and tell her it was a mistake; that she was too young to be bound to him; that he was taking an unfair advantage of her; that— His mind refused to work. He gave it up and yielded himself to sheer misery.

While he tossed and worried, Asenath was enjoying the sleep of the just. She found her mother waiting for her when Rawlings had gone, curious to learn of the evening's happenings. Asenath was in a most communicative mood. She was not only willing, but anxious, to talk about her experience.

Mrs. McBride's interest was mainly in the material aspect of the affair. She wanted to know what food she had been offered, what kind of a house the Dunnes had, about their servants and so on. Asenath satisfied her curiosity as well as she could in regard to these points and then, when the limits of Mrs. McBride's imagination were reached, began to talk about Mary Dunne.

"Mamma, I think Mary's the most wonderful, the sweetest, the best— Oh! she's just grand. After

supper, I mean dinner, she asked me to come up into her room. I told you how sweet it was. Did I tell you about her little bag of powder puffs? She don't use 'em herself. They're just for her visitors, and when they've been used once, why, she throws 'em away. What do you think of that? Well, we went into her room and she talked lovely to me. I liked her the first minute when she was here on Tuesday, but up there, in her room, I was just crazy about her. She told me such sensible things, I couldn't tell you all she said, and Oh! she thinks you sew just grand. I told her how you make all my dresses. She thinks this one's lovely. Oh, I wish I was like her. She is good and kind and smart. I've never met anybody like her. It's no wonder Jim's crazy about her. He's so glad I like her, he was awful anxious for us to be good friends. And we are."

This induced a new line of questioning on the part of Mrs. McBride, which Asenath answered as well as she could, although not always to the complete satisfaction of her parent, whose curiosity was well nigh insatiable. While they were still talking, they heard the clock strike one. Then they both went to bed, each happy in her own way.

CHAPTER XX

EVERY day, during her lunch hour, Asenath, following Rawlings' instructions, called him on the telephone. There was no special purpose in this further than the procuring of an additional contact. In these brief talks, neither of them had anything to communicate that was of any consequence whatever. Asenath enjoyed it, it gave her something to do which rather heightened the sense of her own importance, and, in addition, she liked to talk to him about the very few things that came in her mind about which she was able to talk. But, if he had told her that, for some reason or other, these noonday talks were to be discontinued, it would have made very little, if any, difference to her.

Quite different was his feeling with regard to them. After the second day, he was thoroughly self-conscious when the telephone operator called him. He fancied that she did it with a mock-accusing air and he was thoroughly uncomfortable. But he looked forward to these daily talks as a relief to his intense desire to see Asenath.

On the morning following her visit to the Dunnes, Asenath was told by Rawlings, during their chat over the telephone, that he would not be able to come to see her in the evening because of an unusual press of work in the office, which would hold him until quite a late hour. This was partly true, but the principal reason for his

action was that he was still under the influence of his unrest of the night before. He was at the point where he was actually considering how he might break his engagement. This idea was intermittent only, for, most of the time, he was controlled by his desire for her. Vaguely, he recognized that, in her presence, it would be impossible for him to consider the matter coolly, and he felt that he must settle it promptly and once for all.

Asenath was quite satisfied with Rawlings' announcement. She would have been glad to see him, but, since she had no doubt whatever of his complete devotion to her, she was entirely content to spend an evening without him. To be more strictly accurate, she was even somewhat pleased at the prospect.

When she returned to Susan, with whom, as usual, she was lunching, she remarked:

"Jim ain't coming tonight. He's got to work at the office."

"That's too bad," answered Susan. "What are you going to do?"

"Oh! I guess I'll read a little, and maybe I'll sew."

"I'm going over to May Wilson's house tonight after supper. How'd you like us to run over to your house?"

"That'd be fine."

Asenath, after her supper, took out "Vanity Fair" and made another attempt at it. She determined that she would read up to the dictionary episode and, by dint of much perserverance, finally achieved the first

chapter. But she did not enjoy any aspect of the undertaking except her satisfaction in the accomplishment of a difficult task. She had understood very little of the text, for she was utterly without any standards which would have enabled her to appreciate the quality of the satire.

She laid the book away and completely dismissed it from her thoughts. She began her sewing and was busily engaged at it when a ring at the doorbell announced the arrival of Susan and May. This was shortly before eight o'clock.

At about eight-thirty there was another ring at the doorbell, which interrupted their talk about the Dunnes. Both Susan and May were extremely curious and had plied Asenath with an interminable series of questions, which she had answered with great pleasure and not a little pride. The ring of the bell, however, cut this short. Asenath went to the door and was much surprised and, to tell the truth, not altogether pleased, to see Rawlings. This was but momentary, however, for she quickly felt some gratification in the idea of having her fiancé's inability to remain away from her actually demonstrated to her friends.

Rawlings had been unable to concentrate on his work, and, after struggling with it for two hours, had recognized the futility of hoping to accomplish anything in his present mental condition. He closed his desk shortly after seven o'clock and went to a restaurant for dinner.

But he had no appetite and left most of the food untasted. Then he walked the streets, turning over and over in his mind the one subject which obsessed him.

Suddenly he was aware that he was in the neighborhood of McBrides' house, and, dimly recognizing in the unconscious direction of his steps the presence of some outward guidance in the determination of his problem, he made up his mind that he must free himself at once. While still under the influence of this resolution, he hastened his stride, and, a few minutes later, rang McBrides' doorbell. He had not been able to decide just what he would say, but he was determined that, in some way or other, he would make it plain to Asenath that their engagement had been a mistake. He had no doubt that she would release him. But even in the brief interval between ringing the bell and the opening of the door, he was again thrown into uncertainty by the thought of the meanness of his contemplated action and what would be thought of it by others. Of its effect on Asenath herself he thought but little.

Asenath's first surprise over, she greeted him in her customary manner. She held up her face to him to kiss. He did so, and with the contact of her lips he knew only that he wanted her; that it would be impossible for him to carry out his purpose. He felt that he must explain his unexpected coming.

"I got through sooner than I expected and thought I'd take a chance of your being up," he said.

"That was a cinch," she answered. "I never go to bed until ten, anyway. Come in. Susan and May are here."

This was a decidedly unpleasant announcement to Rawlings. He did not want to see them and he resented Asenath's association with them. He felt it to be a reflection on him.

"Oh! are they?" he said hastily. "Well, then, I won't stop."

"Jim, you don't mean it?" she answered. "What would they think of such a thing?"

"You don't need to tell them I was here, do you?"

"Jim, please come in. They won't stay long," she pleaded.

"All right, then," he said, grudgingly, "but I don't like them and I don't want to see them. I can't imagine what you see in them, either."

"Oh! Jim!" was all that Asenath could say.

He closed the door behind him, which she understood as a final agreement to come in. She led the way to the dining room, where the girls were. Rawlings greeted them with frozen politeness. He showed his dissatisfaction so plainly that Asenath perceived it and became rather angry. May and Susan felt it instantly and determined to leave as soon as their standard of politeness would permit. This meant that a little conversation was absolutely necessary. It was of the most perfunctory nature, however, and, in not over five minutes, the girls had gone.

When Asenath returned to Rawlings after seeing her friends to the door, he was made aware of something new in her, something he had not yet experienced. He was thoroughly angry himself. He had made up his mind that if the engagement was to go on, Asenath must promise to give up her association with these girls. He was troubled by the alteration in her manner, he could not explain it, and this but added to his resentment.

"What on earth do you see in those girls?" he asked.

Asenath was silent; she looked at him with an injured air.

"Why don't you answer me?" he asked, growing angrier constantly.

But Asenath still held her tongue. She looked at him in mute protest.

"I don't know what to make of you," he went on, after a pause; "I rush away from my work just for the pleasure of being with you for a little while, and when I ask you a civil question you won't answer." His words came without thought. He scarcely recognized their utter mendacity.

Still she was silent, and, in his desire to make her talk, to compel some admission of the correctness of his attitude, he went on, no longer remembering the purpose of his coming in his desire to master her.

"I can't understand you. You tell me you love me, you say I am generous with you, you let me believe that your only desire is to please me, and yet, when I take

exception to your associating with a couple of ordinary girls, girls that you positively couldn't associate with as my wife, you sit there and mope and haven't even the politeness to answer a civil question. I guess I had better go, and let you have the company of your friends." The intonation of this last word carried all of the contempt imaginable.

But Asenath was still silent. She stared before her in vacancy. She was thoroughly angry. It would have been a great relief to her to say something that would hurt him, that would make him feel the sense of injury which she felt, but nothing would come to her lips.

He waited a moment and then got up from his chair and made a few steps towards the door. She did not move but continued to stare into vacancy. He turned to look at her, and the piteous expression on her face overcame him. With a sudden rush, he realized that he must have her, he could not break with her, that if he left her now, he would be condemned to endless misery.

"Asenath," he said, "won't you talk to me?" She looked up at him, he saw tears in her eyes, and this was the final touch. He came over to her and took her hand, which she yielded to him passively. But she said nothing.

"Asenath," he said again, "won't you please talk to me?"

"Oh! Why are you so mean to me?" she said. And now the tears flowed freely, and she gave herself up to his embrace, sobbing like the child she was.

Presently, she was calmer, and they talked the matter out freely. He accused himself of brutality, of unworthiness, of everything which he could think of in the rapture of his new possession of her. When he left, two hours later, he was again in the clouds. He loved her and nothing must ever come between them again.

CHAPTER XXI

ON the following Monday morning, as Asenath was approaching the door of the building which contained both the exchange in which she was employed and the main office of the Telephone Company, she saw a familiar figure coming towards her. Instantly she recognized Larned.

For a moment she hoped he would pass without seeing her, but for a moment only. She would have been utterly unable to give any reason for the thrill of happiness which she experienced at the sight of him, but she felt it in its full intensity.

He saw her almost immediately and his smile of recognition added much to her pleasure. They came together at the door. She spoke first.

"Good morning," he answered, hesitated for a moment, and then said, "Madame or, perhaps I had better say Mademoiselle, Vigée."

"Why don't you say all of it?" she asked.

"Well, you see, Le Brun was not her maiden name, and it wouldn't do to call you Madame."

"Why not?"

"Because Madame is the same as Mrs. It's used only for married women, and you're not married yet, I presume." This with a mischievous smile.

This brought Asenath to a sudden recollection of

her engagement to Rawlings, which she had momentarily forgotten in her pleasure at meeting Larned.

"Not yet," she answered gravely, "but pretty soon."

"Really?" he asked with surprise. He was rather struck by the fact that he was distinctly chagrined at the news.

"Yes, I'm engaged to a man you used to know."

"Who is the lucky fellow?"

"James Rawlings."

"Rawlings, Rawlings. Oh, yes. I remember him. It's been years since I've seen him. Well, I wish you joy."

"Thank you very much," said Asenath. She was surprised to find that she was rather sorry that she was engaged. She did not try to find any reason for it, she merely felt it rather vaguely.

Larned was about to allow her to pass him, when she said:

"Oh! Mr. Larned, I guess you think I'm terrible, and that I've got no manners at all because I never thanked you for that sweet picture you sent me. I tried to write you a letter. I began one, but it just wouldn't come out right, and then it got to be too late. I love the picture, it's in my room. I look at it every day."

"Oh! That's all right. Miss— Do you know I've actually forgotten your name?"

"McBride, Asenath McBride."

"To be sure, Miss McBride. And to forget a name

like Asenath. Say, Rawlings' name ought to be Joseph instead of James, ought'nt it?"

"Yes," said Asenath, laughing. Oh! This man was delightful. He had fun in him. She remembered her pleasure in the talk they had had by the brook.

"Well, I must be on my way," he said. "You know a workingman has to keep good hours."

"A workingman!" said Asenath. "I thought you were a school teacher."

"That's past history. I haven't taught school since—since last Friday. I'm in business now. I'm working for the Telephone Company, Engineering Department. This is my shop right here," he said, pointing to the building in front of which they stood.

"It's mine, too," said Asenath.

"That's so. You told me you were a 'hello girl'."

"No, I didn't. We don't say 'hello' nowadays."

"That's right. Well, I'm glad we'll be able to see each other occasionally. Tell Rawlings that I congratulate him."

They entered the building together. Asenath left him at the fifth floor. Mixed with her great pleasure in their talk there was still a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. However, this did not last long and soon she gave herself up to the enjoyment of remembering every detail of his sprightly talk. Surely she had never met anyone so interesting; no one to whom she talked so freely. It seemed as though he inspired her, she never

felt mute or incapable in his presence. Rawlings was a fine fellow and she had no doubt that she loved him, but yet, with him, at times, she simply couldn't say the things she felt. She wondered why it was.

At noon, she told Susan all about her interview with Larned. But Susan was not much interested. She had another matter which claimed her attention. At the first chance, she asked:

"Say, Queenie, what was the matter with your man on Friday evening? I've been wanting to ask you ever since, but I haven't had the chance." This was quite true, for Rawlings had met Asenath as she left the exchange on Saturday at noon and had practically monopolized her for the rest of that day and also all of Sunday.

"What do you mean?" asked Asenath.

"He was awful grumpy. He acted as though May and I were dirt. My, but maybe he can't hand out the icy mitt."

Asenath was troubled. She felt that she really could not tell Susan the truth, and invention was beyond her powers.

"I don't know," she said.

"Didn't he apologize, or explain or nothing?" asked Susan.

"He *was* grouchy," admitted Asenath after a short pause. "Did May notice anything?"

"Did she? She was furious. She said she won't ever come to your house again."

Asenath did not know what to say to this, so she wisely kept silent. Presently she said:

"Sue, you're not mad at me, are you?"

Susan was convinced that Asenath knew more than she would tell. But she had had considerable experience and not much success in making her talk against her will and, for that reason, she decided not to press the question just now.

"I'm not mad at you," she said. "It wasn't your fault. Only, if Mr. Rawlings don't want to see me, I guess I can keep out of his way. That's all."

And thus the matter dropped.

Since the preceding Friday, Rawlings had given himself up to complete happiness in his engagement to Asenath. It is true, of course, that he had spent nearly the whole of his time with her since their little misunderstanding and the subsequent reconciliation, and, when he was with her, he was never in any doubt. Her charm was all-potent.

He came to see her Monday evening and they went out for a walk. Without having any special objective they presently found themselves in the neighborhood of the Dunnes' house. When they remarked this, Rawlings asked:

"Would you like to drop in for a moment to see Mary? I don't imagine she's out, although I know that Raymond is."

"I'd love to," answered Asenath, "only I ain't dressed for a visit."

"You look all right to me," said Rawlings, "and, besides, she's your sister now, so I don't suppose you need stand on any ceremony."

They found Mary at home. She was very glad to see Asenath. She found her looking quite as well in her simple, homemade coat and skirt as in the more elaborate dress which she had worn when she had dined there.

They were talking of indifferent matters when a telegram was handed in. It was for Rawlings. He opened and read it, and made an exclamation of surprise.

"What do you think?" he cried. "Uncle George is dead."

"What!" exclaimed Mary.

He handed her the telegram.

It read: "George Rawlings died suddenly today of heart failure. Funeral Thursday." It was dated San Francisco.

"Isn't it awful," said Mary. "Just think, he was only a little over fifty-five. He's never had a day of illness, as far as I know. I thought he'd live for many years."

"Had he any family?" asked Asenath. She wanted to be sympathetic, but scarcely knew how. She felt so utterly out of all of this.

"He never married," answered Mary.

Through Rawlings' head but one idea ran, and that was of the wealth which would come to him through

this death. He did not know how much it was, but he was sure that it was a very large amount. He was silent during the rest of the evening, and Asenath, who had forgotten that this death meant riches to her fiancé, ascribed his taciturnity to grief. She wanted to comfort him and, when they were alone again, ventured on some slight marks of affection which, at any other time, would have transported him to the seventh heaven, but which, in his present preoccupation, only slightly affected him.

On his way home, for the first time since Friday evening, he was again in doubt about his engagement. The prospect of immediate great wealth made a difference. His now assured financial position behooved him to be very certain that Asenath would be capable of meeting the requirements of the great social position which he now contemplated. He felt again that he had been foolish in his precipitancy. Why had he sold himself so cheaply after all? He could not understand it and it vexed him.

What Mary had said of her now came back to him with force. Asenath was ignorant, there was no doubt. She was undoubtedly good, but just as undoubtedly she was not clever. What magic was there in her which controlled him? Why had he capitulated so easily last Friday when the very opportunity which he had sought lay within his grasp?

As he thought of this, he saw, in imagination, her

uplifted face with tears in her eyes and the mute expression of pain, and again he was engulfed in a great wave of sympathy, of desire for her. Ah! Well, he did love her. He had given his word and he had no wish to take it back.

This new phase of his life surely complicated matters for him. He wondered what he would be called upon to do, what the amount of his fortune would be. He wondered if Asenath had any idea of how lucky she was. And then the thought of the McBrides came to him, their ignorance, their worse than mediocrity, and again his engagement to Asenath was a burden.

CHAPTER XXII

AT noon the next day, when Asenath called Rawlings on the telephone in accordance with their custom, she was much surprised to learn from him that he was going to leave for San Francisco in the evening.

"Won't I see you before you go?" she inquired.

"Oh! Yes. I'm not leaving until ten-thirty. I'll be up right after dinner," he replied.

He had not explained to her the reason for his going, and she wondered what it might be. It was not a matter of the most lively interest for her; she was but moderately curious. San Francisco seemed a long way off, but she did not know whether it was a journey of two days or one of a week. He had not told her how long he would be away, so she also made a question of this. A week would have seemed about right, but then she remembered that she had no idea of how long it would take to make the journey and, therefore, following her usual custom, she put the whole matter aside. She would know in due course, so why waste time in fruitless speculation? Then came the thought that she would miss him; she had already become thoroughly used to his constant companionship. How would she spend her time?

Rawlings' going had been decided upon as the result of a telegram from his Uncle's lawyer suggesting his

coming at once to make necessary arrangements. The telegram had informed him that he had been named as one of the executors of the will.

During the morning, Rawlings had again determined to break his engagement. His thoughts of the evening before came to him with redoubled force. He had always taken himself rather seriously, but, now, he seemed to have become a hundredfold more important than ever before. He felt that he saw the matter clearly, dispassionately, where, before, he had been misled by an attachment, an attachment only, for a most charming young girl, it is true, yet one scarcely worthy to share the important position in life which would now become his. It was a sort of infatuation, he admitted, even though, up to the present, it had seemed to him to be much more, a real love affair. He was graciously sorry for her; it would be a great disappointment to her and her family, but, after all, it was much better for her to suffer the pain of parting with him now than for him to bear the burden of her during his whole career. Besides, she was very young and would probably get over it, and, in due course, marry someone in her own station in life.

He felt immensely relieved when he had come to this decision. There was no room in his satisfaction for self-accusation. He had made a mistake, this much he was willing to allow, but he was going to admit it in a manly way. No one could do more.

But when, in McBrides' doorway, he again was unable

to refuse the invitation in Asenath's upturned face, he knew that he could never break with her in her presence. She was particularly charming to him this evening. She inquired minutely into the length of his stay, how long a time would be required for the journey, about his uncle and many other matters connected with his going away.

Gradually he fell completely under the spell of her charm and called himself a fool for ever thinking that he could do without her. Presently, he asked her:

"Will you miss me?"

"Oh, yes, dreadfully," she answered. "I won't know what to do with myself."

"You'll write to me every day, won't you?" he asked.

This was something she had not thought of. Writing letters was a fearful undertaking to her. She was reminded of her last attempt, the unfinished letter to Larned.

However, she felt compelled to promise to write to him every day.

"You won't mind how dumb my letters are, will you?" she asked anxiously. "When I start to write, it just seems as though I can't think at all."

"They will be lovely letters for me, my dear," he said, "for you will have written them."

And so on.

One thing he did not mention and that was the fortune he had inherited. Of course, he did not know that Asenath had forgotten that he had mentioned the mat-

ter to her. He could not guess that she thought him rich with his three thousand a year and would have looked on this new fortune as unnecessary; good to have, perhaps, but superfluous. He could not have told why he did not mention this matter to her, although it was the principal subject of his thought apart from his present absorption in her.

At nine-thirty, he left her with a display of affection even more fervent than usual at their partings. She was almost sad as he left. For the first time, he had aroused some real affectionate emotion in her. Not very much, it is true, and what there was of it distinctly not of a passionate nature, but still enough to make his going seem a real loss.

As he turned to wave his hand to her at the corner, he saw a sad little smile on her lovely face which smote him with sudden remorse for his unfulfilled, but seriously contemplated, determination.

The following evening Asenath sat herself before the table in her room, laid a sheet of writing paper upon it, picked up a pen, dipped it in the ink and wrote the date at the top of the page.

Then she gave herself up to thought. How should she address him? "Dear Jim?" No, that was too ordinary. "My darling?" No, that was too gushing. She never called him "darling." Sometimes she would say "Jim, dear." That was it. That was nice and rather original. So she wrote "Jim, dear," at the beginning of the letter.

Then came more thought. What should she write? What on earth was there to write? She had not done a single thing all day that wasn't exactly what she did every day. She couldn't write stuff like that to him. Then she questioned herself; what should she say to him if he were with her? Well. he wasn't with her, and she couldn't imagine anything that she would have told him, anyway. It depended on what he would say to her. He always furnished the subjects of their conversation. She wished he was with her; it was fearfully dull sitting there trying to write a letter instead of having him to talk to her and saying such pleasant things, too. She would write that to him.

So, under the superscription, she wrote:

> I miss you so that I can't tell you how much. I am writing to you but wishing you were here, it is so lonely. I guess you have spoiled me, because before we were engaged I used to sit alone many a night all by myself and I was just as happy as I could be. I hope you will soon be back with me again.
>
> Mamma and papa are both well and send their best regards.
>
> With lots of love and kisses,
>
> Yours ever,
> Asenath.

There were a great many words crossed out and other marks of the prodigious labor involved in this composition. Asenath read this first copy several times and found

it quite satisfactory. Then she wrote a fair copy, inclosed it in an envelope, which she addressed and then affixed a stamp. Then she ran downstairs and out to the corner box to mail it.

She felt very happy. As she came back to the house she was humming a tune with great enjoyment. There was no trace in her expression that the loneliness, of which she had complained in her letter, was causing her any depression of spirits.

Still humming, she came into the house and sat by her mother, who was sewing. They fell into conversation. Mrs. McBride was very curious about Rawlings' departure. She wondered why he had gone away so suddenly.

"Do you know anything about this Uncle?" she asked.

"All I know is his name was George and he wasn't married," answered Asenath.

"Was he rich?"

"I don't know." Then suddenly she remembered what Rawlings had told her.

"Yes, I do know, too," she said. "Jim told me some time ago that he would get a lot of money from his Uncle George, but he didn't expect to get it for a long time." She thought for a moment, and then went on: "Jim and Mary were terribly surprised when they got the telegram. He died awful sudden."

"I guess that's why James went away so sudden," remarked Mrs. McBride. "Did he tell you why he was going?"

"Nothing about any money."

"Was he very fond of his Uncle?"

"I guess so. When he got the telegram, he was awful quiet."

"I hope he don't get too much money. It might make him want to change his mind."

"Change his mind about what?"

"Change his mind about marrying a poor girl like you."

"Why! Mamma; he's just crazy about me."

"I know, but don't forget it was awful sudden, and maybe—well, you never can tell."

"Never can tell about what?"

"You never can tell about men. They're awful changeable. To hear them talk you'd think it's the women who are flighty, but I think it's the other way about. Did you write to James?"

"Yes, I just mailed the letter."

Somewhat later, as Asenath was undressing, she wondered whether there was anything in the idea her mother had expressed. Could it be possible that Rawlings might grow tired of her and want to break the engagement? Why, only last night it seemed as though he could never tear himself away. Surely there could be no possible doubt. But if there were, what then? Could she ever be contented again? Could she give up the prospect of the luxurious life on which she had based all of her hopes for the last few weeks? Oh! it would be awful to contemplate. It could not be. But the shadow of doubt that

her mother had put into her mind persisted. It might be that Rawlings, away from her, might meet some girl whom he would like better. She wished that he had not gone away, she had been so contented, so happy. It was silly to go on like this, she thought; she would put the whole thing out of her mind. She extinguished the light and got into bed, expecting, as usual, that she would be asleep in two minutes. But sleep did not come to her and, instead, the doubt of her lover's constancy did. Well, if he became tired of her and wanted someone else, she couldn't help it. Somebody else would come along some day. Rawlings wasn't the only man on earth. And then Larned came into her mind. How deligthful he was; how lively she felt when she was with him. And how silly she was now to think of his ever caring for her. Besides, her mother was mistaken. Rawlings had shown, in every way, how serious he had considered their engagement. Why, he had even considered his kissing her a declaration. Her mother might be right with regard to some men, but never about Rawlings. He was solid; he knew his own mind; he was—and she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

DURING the next ten days Asenath insensibly dropped back into her old way of life. At first, she really missed Rawlings; that is, when the relief that she felt, the day after his departure, had passed away.

The next day after that, she found the prospect of spending the evening without seeing him very dull. During the lunch hour, she asked Susan to spend the evening with her, at McBrides', of course, but Susan had made an appointment, "date" she called it, with May Wilson, whose intimate friend she had now become, and, knowing that May did not like Asenath, particularly since the cavalier treatment she had received at the hands of Rawlings, she was unable to accept the invitation.

That made the prospect of a solitary evening even duller than before. The fact quite justified the expectation. None of her former evening occupations interested her, and, at about half-past eight, she went to bed because of sheer boredom.

But this was only for a few days. At the end of the first week, Asenath had become quite habituated to Rawlings' absence. He was in her mind, naturally, but not as before. She had become accustomed to going along as she had before he had stepped into her life.

On the evening of the fourth day of his absence, she

had received a brief letter from him written en route. Had she had any experience at all in such matters, either at first or second hand, she might have noticed the perfunctory quality of his letter, which offered the most violent contrast to his ordinary manner with her. But Asenath did not notice it. To her a letter was a very formal, a most unusual affair. She would have been quick to feel the affectionate quality of a message written in a warmth of emotion, but she was without any standard which would have enabled her to establish a comparison.

Another letter of much the same sort followed at an interval of two days, and a third three days later. Just eleven days after his going, she received the last letter which he ever wrote her. It had come in the morning after she had gone to work and she found it awaiting her on the bureau in her room. It was Saturday afternoon and she was home early. She had been wondering whether she would have a letter. Not with impatience, because she had no idea of the time necessary to bring a letter across the continent, but merely with the hope that she might have the pleasurable sensation that the important function of receiving a letter gave her. It was, therefore, with great satisfaction that she opened the envelope and set herself to reading. The letter ran thus:

Dear Asenath:

I don't know how to begin this letter. I want to save you all I can, but I do not know

how to say what I feel I must in any way that does not make it painful. I hope you will be able to forgive me the wrong I have done you in acting on an impulse which led me to take what I am now forced to believe was an unjustifiable step.

There is no use trying to put it in any other than the most straightforward way. Our engagement was a terrible mistake and I want you to release me from it. You may ascribe any reason for it that will help to save your feelings. I am willing to confirm any statement that you may care to make.

I am most miserable over the whole business. I see that I have been altogether at fault, but it is much better that we have the pain now than to look forward to a married life which, I am sure, would make us both unhappy. I have been thinking about nothing else for over a week and I cannot see any other course.

Drop me a line telling me what you are going to say about it.

You will always have my esteem and friendship, if you want it. You have done nothing at all with which to reproach yourself. The fault is mine entirely.

Sincerely yours,
James Rawlings.

As the purport of this letter became clear to Asenath, it seemed as though her heart had stopped beating. She read the letter to its end in a sort of semi-stupor. Her mind refused to take in the full meaning of the words

before her. It seemed as though she was about to be crushed by some on-moving mass without the ability to avoid it or save herself in any way. She read and re-read the letter many times and, gradually, the consciousness of its meaning became clear. Then she sat still and tried to find a reason for it all. What had she done? What could have happened to bring about such a result? Why had he been so ardent in his pursuit of her, if this was his real feeling? What could she do? What could she say? And then anger seized her. She felt that she wanted to hurt him, tear him, destroy him. Oh! but he was mean, brutal, even worse.

And then the tears came. For a long time she wept quietly with no sensation except that of blank misery.

Mrs. McBride had awaited her coming downstairs with the letter as long as her curiosity allowed, and, when that had reached its uttermost limit, she came to Asenath's room and entered without formality. The moment she saw her daughter's tear-stained face, with its expression of complete misery, she divined the cause.

"What on earth's happened?" she cried.

Asenath handed the letter to her. She read it with a feeling almost of terror. But this was for a short space only. Then indignation seized her.

"The dirty blackguard," she cried. "The lying hound. To come into a family like this who have always done right and to play us a trick like this. And him a church member, too, who wants to be an elder. I'll show

him. I'll make his name as black as his heart is. I'll—"

"Don't, mamma. Please don't talk like that," cried Asenath, not knowing what she said. She would have been irritated by anything her mother might have said. Her speech was simply the expression of her misery.

"Won't I?" exclaimed Mrs. McBride. "See what your father'll have to say. He'll make him smart for what he's done, the dirty dog."

"What's the use?" said Asenath. "It won't do any good. He don't want me, that's all. Oh!" and she relapsed into weeping.

As Mrs. McBride watched Asenath she felt very miserable. She would have liked to take her in her arms to comfort her, but the McBrides never did anything of the sort. They held each other literally at arm's length in all matters of the affections. Among them was the strongest possible family feeling. They were one family, no matter what happened. But it was not possible to learn this from anything that any of them ever said. On the contrary, they criticised each other freely to their friends. Nor could it be determined by any gesture of affection, for none was ever offered. But this clan spirit, the feeling of the indissolvable unity of the family, was shown most clearly by their own acceptance of it. They took it for granted; they acted as though it were so definite, so settled a matter, that it did not require any evidence of its existence.

At this bitter moment for Asenath, her mother's arms

about her would have sensibly lessened her pain. But she did not know this, for she was unused to marks of affection. Mrs. McBride scarcely ever even kissed her, and when she did it was only a peck.

Mrs. McBride and Asenath sat there silently in the deepest misery for quite a long while, the mother full of sympathy for her daughter and the latter concerned with her own disappointment only. Gradually the full realization of the event came to Asenath. She was not to be rich; would not have an automobile, no servants, no elegant house.

And again she was seized by an unreasoning anger; she wanted to harm Rawlings, to make him suffer as she was suffering now.

"There's your father," suddenly said Mrs. McBride. There had been the sound of the closing of the front door, but Asenath had not heard it.

"Will you come down," asked Mrs. McBride, as Asenath made no answer, "or will I tell him to come up here?"

"Must I see him?" asked Asenath.

"You ought to. He'll know just what you ought to do."

"I'll come down then."

They went downstairs and found McBride in the dining room. He had taken off his coat and hat and was preparing to remove his shoes when they entered. He greeted them with a nod.

"What do you think," cried his wife without any other preliminary, "James has broken off with Asenath.

Read that!" And she literally pushed the letter into his hand.

McBride gave no outward sign of the agitation which possessed him as he read the letter, but it caused him to hold himself in a tight grip. He read it slowly, taking in each word. To the two women it seemed an eternity. When he had finished he looked at them for a moment and then said:

"That'll be the last of him in our church or my name's not McBride. I'll show him that he can't come philandering in my house with my daughter."

"What will everybody say?" cried Mrs. McBride. "What'll we tell them?"

"We'll tell the truth. There's no disgrace to any of us. The shame is on him. He's the jilt, not our girl. We'll show them in church tomorrow morning."

"Oh! I can't go to church tomorrow after all this," said Asenath.

To church you'll go tomorrow if I have to take you out of a sick bed. Do you think I'd have anybody say that we were ashamed or that we were down in the mouth because a lying jilt imposed on us? No; you'll go to church, and you'll hold your head high, too. Do you hear?"

"Yes, papa," said Asenath.

PART THREE
LARNED
CHAPTER XXIV

IN the next few weeks Asenath recovered her usual contented outlook on life. Gradually she forgot to dwell upon the loss that she had suffered. She ceased to think of herself as deeply injured unless there was some forcible reminder. At such times, she would indulge in the luxury of self-pity, but, for the most part, she did not think of her short engagement and the brilliant future that she had believed it promised her. She enjoyed her work; she had her usual lively interest in her dress; she went to church willingly, if without enthusiasm, and, in general, was much the same girl as before. Exactly the same she could not have been under any circumstances.

Her friendship with Susan was maintained, but not with the same interest as before. This was largely owing to Susan's attitude, who, as has been mentioned, had become quite friendly with May Wilson. She had come to be one of the group of boys and girls of which May was a member. She would have been glad to introduce Asenath into "the bunch," as she called it, but for the fact that May did not like Asenath. And, immediately after the breaking of her engagement, Asenath was reluctant to show herself. She felt very much as does the

average mourner; it seemed to her that it would not be fitting to evince any capability for enjoyment.

Of course, this feeling wore off promptly, and, in a few weeks, Asenath would have gladly accepted any offer of entertainment. But, by that time, Susan had lost much of her former active interest in her. Just now, Asenath had nothing to offer her in the way of social opportunity.

Asenath experienced a great relief every time she looked at her edition of Thackeray. That much at least was saved to her; she was no longer compelled to read "Vanity Fair." She had offered these books together with her engagement ring and the la valliere to Mary Dunne shortly after receiving Rawlings' final letter. Mary had found the interview rather painful. She was confident that her brother had done well to break an engagement which he found irksome, as it promised only unhappiness if carried to its eventual conclusion, but the sight of Asenath's obvious effort to appear well under trying circumstances made her distinctly uncomfortable. She was really very sorry for her, although she had complete confidence that a comparatively short period of time would cure her present trouble. It will be remembered that Mary did not believe that Asenath's affections had been deeply engaged.

She took the ring and refused to receive the la valliere, asking Asenath to keep it as a mark of her friendship, which, she assured her, had, in no way, been

affected by what had happened. Of course, Asenath had not brought the books with her, and Mary advised her to keep them, or, if she found them an unpleasant reminder, to give them away. Asenath did not know how to persist in the face of Mary's kindness and determined to give them to the church library at the first opportunity. But she did not do this promptly, and, finally, she did not do it at all. They were in her room, and, until she had grown so accustomed to their presence there that they lost their identity in the general scheme, she had a malicious pleasure in the thought that she did not have to read them.

Every now and then she saw Larned either coming into or going out of the building, perhaps as often as once in two weeks, but she never had an opportunity to speak to him until one Monday morning when she met him at the door about two months after their first meeting.

It was a fine, bright winter morning. not too cold to make standing still in the street uncomfortable, but just enough to be stimulating. Asenath's cheeks offered eloquent testimony of her complete enjoyment of the short walk from the car in this bracing atmosphere.

She appeared to him so beautiful that he could not resist the temptation to stop to chat with her.

Asenath was somewhat ahead of her usual time for arrival and they fell into talk easily without any sense of hurry.

"How do you do," said Larned. He was cudgeling his memory for her name. "McBride" he could not remember at all, and the fact that her Christian name was that of Joseph's wife was all that he could recollect.

"I'm fine," answered Asenath, brightly. She was delighted to meet him. It made her feel gay.

"How's Joseph?" he asked.

"Joseph?"

"I mean—your fiancé. You know we agreed that his name ought to be Joseph, don't you?"

This came with a little shock to Asenath. But only a very little one, for with it came a realizing sense that in Larned's presence she was glad to be free.

"We're not engaged any more," said she. She made this avowal without the difficulty that would naturally have been expected.

Larned was somewhat embarrassed.

"I did not know it," he said, "or I would not have made the stupid joke. I hope I haven't hurt you."

"Oh! Not at all. It's an old story now—nearly two months. I thought everybody knew it."

Larned wished to put her at her ease. "If I had known it," he said, "I would have been knocking at your door the first moment I thought there was a chance. I suppose I'm too late now." His laugh added just the right indication of the way in which his banter was to be received.

But Asenath did not wish to consider it as merely a

joke. To have him knocking at her door was a consummation devoutly to be wished.

"No, you're not," she said, with a smile which accentuated the ingenuousness of her remark.

Larned could not resist asking: "Would you really like me to try?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Do you think I'll knock in vain?" he asked.

"When will you come?" she queried, entirely disregarding his question.

"What has that to do with it?"

"I'd just like to know," she insisted.

"But you don't answer any of my questions."

"Don't I? Well, neither do you answer mine."

"All right. I'll make a bargain with you. I'll answer yours first—your sex always has precedence—if you'll promise to answer mine."

"All right," said Asenath, highly delighted, as always when she was talking with him. There was something that she felt differentiated him from all other people she had ever known. Not only was his every word interesting, but he made it easy for her to talk, too. She felt that when she was with him she always knew just what to say.

"But you haven't promised. So we had better talk about something else. Do you think it will snow?" he asked, looking at the perfectly clear sky with mock seriousness.

"I promise," answered Asenath with a smile which made plain her appreciation of his joke.

"Well then, ask your questions."

"There's only one. When will you come to—to knock on the door?"

"How about Wednesday evening?"

"That's just why I wanted to know, because on Wednesday evening I have to go to prayer meeting."

"Couldn't we have our own prayer meeting?"

Asenath laughed gaily.

"Papa wouldn't stand for that kind of a prayer meeting. He's awful cranky about going to church. I just have to go every Wednesday, no matter what happens." She would have liked to ask him to come some other evening, but something prevented her, she could not have told what.

"Let me see," he said, thoughtfully. "Thursday, Friday, Saturday. How about Saturday?"

"That would be fine."

"Now answer my question."

"What is it?"

"Will I knock in vain?"

"You don't have to knock. You can ring the bell." She said this quite seriously but Larned took it as a form of humor. He found her more charming than ever; he wanted to become well acquainted with her; he thought that he wished to learn the secret of her attraction for him.

"Well, then," he said, "will I ring in vain?"

"No," said Asenath, "I'll open the door myself."

"Very well, what's the address?"

"Same as before," she answered.

"Oh! that's so," he exclaimed. He had quite forgotten having her name and address. This was fortunate, for it saved him admitting that again he had not remembered her name.

"Saturday then," said Asenath.

"Saturday," he answered, and they entered the building and went their respective ways.

At lunch time Asenath told Susan that she had met Larned again and that he was coming to call on her on Saturday evening.

"How do you get away with it, Queenie?" asked Susan.

Asenath showed her pleasure at the implied compliment but did not answer the question. Instead, she asked:

"You remember him, don't you?"

"Sure, and I remember that stiff he had with him in the country. What was his name?"

"Graham."

"Yes, that's it. You sure can put it over. I wish I knew how. What do you do?"

"I don't do anything. Do you think he likes me?"

"Ain't he coming to see you?"

Asenath had no answer for this, which satisfied her,

so she dropped the subject, and Susan, observing a well recognized symptom, did not press her inquiry.

During the morning and at several other times on the following days, Susan's question returned to her mind. What was it that made Larned like her? She thought of the question and wondered what the answer might be. She knew that she was very good looking and briefly this idea came and went, but did not establish a durable connection in her mind with the inquiry set up by Susan's remark. She did not even apply the general principle that men are attracted by feminine beauty, although she knew this precisely as she knew how to discriminate between hot and cold.

What her mind dwelt on, in this connection, was Larned himself. She had never wanted anybody so before. In his company, she forgot herself completely, she was supremely happy. The sight of him, the sound of his voice, the feeling of his physical presence exercised an almost magical influence upon her. She hung upon his least word, she reacted to his slightest change of expression. Asenath did not know these things as definite facts, they did not make themselves clear to her; she was completely innocent of introspection of any kind.

But what she did know was that she wanted to see him, that she wished to be with him, and she looked forward to his coming on Saturday with greater interest than she had ever known in anything in her whole life.

She did not wonder why she did so, she made no attempt to analyze her emotions, just as she was quite content not to push the inquiry which Susan's question had brought. That was answered completely in the thought "he must like me."

CHAPTER XXV

THE Saturday evening upon which Larned was to make his call upon Asenath was bright and cold. When he issued from the door of his house he was tempted to walk instead of riding, as he had originally intended. He yielded readily to the temptation, for he was greatly given to walking and, by preference, alone. It gave him an opportunity for working out his ideas. Larned always walked rapidly and it seemed as though the exhilaration induced by the exercise speeded up his mental faculties in every way.

On this particular evening he had something to work out. Several times since he had made the appointment with Asenath he wondered what had led him to make it. He admitted readily that she was a very pretty girl, he knew he liked them good looking; that she had excellent taste in her dress, he always admired that; her voice was pleasant, her changes of expression most interesting, her smile fascinating, but all of this was not enough. He was confident that she possessed a good mind, even though, in all probability, she was ignorant of many things which are included in a fair education. He did not know this, he had no basis for any such knowledge, but he surmised it. Still, she was young and inexperienced, and, in all probability, had had no edu-

cation at all except what she might have picked up in the elementary schools. From what she had told him of the family's church-going habits, he supposed that the influence of her parents had not been of much value in her secular education.

Truly, except for her looks and a certain general charm, there wasn't much to her; in fact, with these exceptions, she was undoubtedly a commonplace young girl. But then, if this was true, and there did not seem to be any doubt of it, why was he, Harold Prentis Larned, going to see her with great pleasure, why was his anticipation of enjoyment so lively?

He had asked himself this question several times since he had made the appointment with her, but he had been unable to answer it satisfactorily, and, when he set out on Saturday evening, he took it up again and succeeded in reaching the conclusion that it wasn't worth while trying to find a reason for a given result when not all of the factors were known. He worked the problem out to the point where he admitted that Asenath possessed sufficient charm for him to make him want to be with her, but beyond this he was unable to go. To analyze this quality of hers was impossible in view of the small amount of time he had spent in her company.

Larned liked to work things out scientifically. He was a good mathematician. His was a most orderly mind. The only child of two fond parents, he had had his own way in life thus far. Whether as a result of his own individual

character, or the training he had received, or both, his way was not that of a spoiled child. He had chosen an academic career immediately after his graduation, had followed it for a couple of years and had given it up when he had become somewhat doubtful as to whether it was his true vocation. At the university he had taken the course in electrical engineering, and, therefore, when he reached the decision to discontinue teaching, he had looked for a position in that field and obtained a fairly satisfactory post in the engineering department of the telephone company.

His father had not offered any opposition, although he had hoped that Harold would have elected to come into his business. While he was by no means a rich man, his knitting mill paid good profits and was what might be called a thoroughly successful business. He and Harold were close friends, their friendship based upon mutual respect and many common interests which Larned senior had carefully cultivated in the younger man, although it must be said that the soil was very fertile and the mere planting of the seed had been all that was necessary.

Harold's relation to his mother was naturally quite different. He was not alone her "man child," he was her baby as well. Between them existed the most perfect understanding. She was a very wise woman, and, what is more, a very good one. She was not pious, none of them were, but she was kind, considerate, tactful, directed always by the finest motives.

This may give some slight idea of the young man who was walking briskly to call on Asenath on this fine Saturday evening. What remains to be learned of him will be disclosed by those incidents and that part of the development of Asenath's early womanhood in which he figured.

When he arrived at the door of McBrides' house, he was in the most buoyant spirits imaginable. He rang the bell and then turned his back to the door to employ the moment of his waiting in looking at the brilliant full moon. He had scarcely turned before he heard the noise of the door being opened. He was just in time in turning back to meet the full opening of the door and, in the bright moonlight, he saw a vision which he never forgot. It was Asenath, in her simple, tasteful dress, her face illumined by a smile which expressed a quality of welcome which it would be impossible to put into words.

"How do you do," she said, holding out her hand.

He took it and looked at her for a moment without speaking.

"You're as good as your word," he said as he relinquished her hand and followed her into the house. They went into the parlor after Larned had hung up his coat and hat on the rack in the hall.

"I've been in an awful fix about you," Asenath said, while he was hanging up his coat.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Papa wanted to know all about you and I couldn't tell him a single thing except that you worked for the company and you used to teach school and your name and how old you were."

"Well, wasn't that enough?"

"He wanted to know where you went to church and I couldn't tell him because I didn't know."

"I told you."

"When?"

"Down in the country by the brook. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"I told you I never went to church."

"Oh! I know that. But that ain't what I mean."

"What *do* you mean?"

"What church does your family go to?"

"None."

"They must belong to some church."

"Oh! I see. Well, the last association, official of course, of any of the members of my family, was with the Unitarian Church."

"I never heard of that church. Where is it?"

"At Paley and Horton Streets there's one."

"Is it anything like the Presbyterian Church?"

"Some people call the Unitarians Presbyterian Jews."

"You're not a Jew, are you?"

"No. But what is the reason of your father's interest in my religion?"

"He's awful cranky about who comes to see me, and he asked me a lot of questions. I couldn't tell him about your church and then he raised a fuss about your coming here until he asked me if your father was in the Larned Hosiery Company and I told him 'yes, he was'."

"How did you know it? I never told you."

"I didn't know it, but he had me near crazy with all his old questions and when he asked me that I just said 'yes' before I thought. Then it was all right, for his factory—they make packing boxes—does business with the Larned Hosiery Company."

"So, I'm all right now, am I?"

"Yes."

This was a great deal of talk for Asenath, so much, in fact, that she was surprised at her own verbosity.

Larned had been much interested in what she had told him. He thought he had never seen such charming naïveté. He had been quite conscious of her rather crude speech, but it did not affect him unpleasantly. Asenath's pleasure in his visit showed itself in an unusual animation. She felt lively, gay, happy, and her color and expression evidenced this strongly. He found her even more beautiful than he had thought her. He was enjoying himself keenly.

They talked of other things; every subject was introduced by Larned and practically all of the talking was done by him. Asenath hung on his least word and indi-

cated her interest both by her expression and an occasional monosyllable. At length, to illustrate something he had just told, Larned said:

"It was just like old Gradgrind in 'Hard Times.' You know?"

He said this quite unconsciously, taking it for granted that she knew the story. Had he thought, he would have known better. The pause which followed his remark was occasioned by his considering how he might best relieve her from what he was afraid would be an embarrassing situation. But Asenath was not embarrassed at all. She said:

"No, I don't. Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"About 'Old Gradgrind'."

"He was a character in a book by Dickens called 'Hard Times.' He kept a school—You don't want me to tell you the story."

"Would I like it?"

"What kind of stories do you like?"

"I don't know. I've never read any."

"None at all?"

"I read a few pages in 'Vanity Fair.' Jim gave me the whole set, but I didn't like it."

This was decidedly a new phase. To Larned it seemed almost impossible that a girl of nineteen could never have read anything. He was much interested. This offered him an opportunity to be useful.

"Was that really the first book you ever tried?" he asked.

"The first grown-up book."

"You might have a great deal of pleasure from reading. Would you like to try a book I have, one I'm sure you'd enjoy?"

Asenath would willingly have tried anything that Larned suggested.

"I'd love to," she said.

"The book is called 'Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch.' I'll send it to you."

"Thank you," said Asenath. The name of the book was rather promising, and then—Larned had said she would like it and that carried conviction.

"Would you like me to bring the book with me the next time I come, provided, of course, that you want me to come again, and then I could read some of it to you."

"Oh! That would be grand," said Asenath, with enthusiasm. And then she added gravely: "I guess you think I'm awful dumb."

"I certainly do not. Stupidity isn't a matter of education. A really stupid person would be one who had had the advantages an education offers, but who was not able to get anything out of it. On the other hand, there must be many people who have fine minds but who, through poverty or other circumstances, never have had the opportunity to learn. You're very foolish to think

of yourself as stupid merely because you haven't had the chance to acquire a taste for reading. You're plenty young enough to begin now. I don't suppose that you ever had the chance to go to the high school, did you?"

"No!" said Asenath. "I only went part way through the grammar school." She was delighted to learn that Larned did not think her "dumb." He did not use that word. He said "stupid." She made a mental note to employ it herself hereafter.

"I don't suppose any of your folks read much, do they?"

"Papa reads the Bible and the papers."

"Well! We'll begin your literary education the next time I come."

"When will you come?"

"We'll arrange that later on."

Larned left rather early. He had had a delightful evening. He had found Asenath most refreshing and he told himself that he could be of use to her in helping her to acquire a taste for books. It was an interesting experiment. No longer did he question the basis of her attraction for him. She had every attribute of feminine charm, and, in addition, she offered him this exceptional opportunity. The teacher in him leaped to it as the trout to the fly.

All of his carefully reared edifice of psychology fell to the ground in the face of Asenath's personality. His pride in his own invulnerability would not permit him

to see that his was just another case of a man meeting the woman who holds for him that inscrutable attraction which defies his own analysis. He did not yet know that she was that woman. He knew only that he was happy in her presence and the opportunity to teach her seemed a satisfactory reason for his extraordinary interest in her. He was quite willing to admit a fondness for certain of her sex as a sufficient basis for an ordinary interest.

CHAPTER XXVI

ON the second Tuesday evening following, Larned presented himself at McBrides' in fulfillment of an appointment he had made with Asenath a few days before. She met him at the door. Never in her life had she been so eager about anything or anybody as she was now with regard to Larned. He was in her mind much of the time. She had his image before her; she remembered the play of expression on his face; she heard his voice. She made no attempt to study his character or his mentality; she did not try to analyze either the man or his actions. Asenath's mind never worked that way. She thought of persons and things as concrete entities only. Mentally, she looked at them, heard them, felt them, but she neither analyzed nor classified them in any but the most obvious way.

Larned's visit had strongly confirmed her liking for him. She felt safe with him because he appeared to understand just what she wanted. She seemed to have no conscious desire to make an impression of any kind upon him. What she wanted was to be with him and that was all. He filled her horizon completely.

When, in speaking of his visit to Susan, that young woman had made a pointed remark which intimated that here was a new suitor to take the place of the old, Asenath actually felt a sense of shock. She had not

dreamed of it. That she should ever even fancy that so wonderful a person as Larned might look upon her in this way seemed incredible.

She had no standard by which to measure his intellectual gifts. In fact, they seemed to her to be immeasurable. She admired his intellect vaguely; she was sure that his learning was immense; but what made her happy in the mere thought of him was not admiration, but that he awoke in her a quality of emotion which hitherto she had never known, the joy of which was so great and so thrilling as to be almost painful. Many times between his first visit and the appointment of the second she wondered how soon he would come again. And her wondering was a yearning for him, a desire to be with him so strong that there was no mistaking it. After the appointment was made, she counted the intervening hours.

There had been quite a heavy snowfall on that Tuesday afternoon, which contributed greatly to Larned's joy in living. He could not account for it, but he loved the snow. He recognized the strength of the points that his father was able to make against it in their jocular arguments on the subject, but retorted always that, in spite of the fact that he could not justify his enjoyment of the snow by reason, he still liked it. So, this evening he trudged the nearly two miles that separated his home from Asenath's through a covering of snow which was six inches thick in many places. He reached McBrides'

in a high state of physical exhilaration, not in the least fatigued by his exertion, and in the best humor possible.

Asenath promptly responded to his high spirits, and, as was usual with her when in his company, was almost talkative. Larned jested with her, paid her mock compliments, made fun of himself, and she, reacting to his humor rather than understanding it, was transported with delight.

Presently she said:

"You promised to bring me a book. Did you forget it?"

"By no means," he answered. "It's in my coat pocket. I'll get it." He went into the hall and returned almost immediately with the book in his hand.

"Shall I read to you?" he inquired.

"Oh! Yes," she answered with fervor.

He began the simple story with some doubt in his mind. He was afraid that, after all, he may have underrated her literary taste. The story was simply childish. At home he had read through enough of it in half an hour to learn the character of its contents. He had been moved to recommend it to Asenath because he had heard it discussed by some very young girls. They had pronounced it "lovely."

He read well, making the most of the material in hand, and, as he glanced up from time to time, he saw that Asenath's whole attention was fixed and that she was enjoying both the story and the characterization to

the full. Then he knew that he had chosen wisely, and he believed that he had hit upon the path which would eventually lead her out on the high road of literary appreciation.

"How do you like it?" he asked when he ceased reading.

"I love it," said Asenath with enthusiasm. "Isn't it funny?"

"It's very fine," he said. "It isn't exactly true to life, but then it seems to be true to certain ideals that many people have. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Asenath would have given much to be able to say that she did know, but she did not and she said so. Never before had she felt that she was lacking in any respect. The people whom she had met hitherto, while they had not given her any sense of superiority, had not, on the other hand, made her feel inferior. She had always felt that what she did not know was not worth knowing. But this man was different. With him, she was conscious of an intense desire to respond to his every mood, to be everything that he might wish her.

"What I mean is this," he went on. "Suppose all your life, whenever you ate a cherry, you had been told that it was a strawberry. You would naturally think all cherries were strawberries, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," said Asenath, wondering what possible connection this could have with the book they had just been reading.

"Well, then," he continued, "if you were given a strawberry and told it was a strawberry, you wouldn't believe it, would you?"

"No," said Asenath, more mystified than ever.

"You would eat it and enjoy it. You would recognize that it was some kind of fruit. You might even be willing to admit, just to avoid an argument, that it was a strawberry, but all the time you'd say to yourself, 'They may think this is a strawberry, maybe it is *some* kind of strawberry, but I know what a real strawberry is.' And what you'd think was the real strawberry would actually be a cherry. Now, what I'm getting at is this: People go on living their ordinary lives every day. They get so accustomed to doing everyday things that they don't think about them except as parts of themselves. You see your hands, but you don't think of what wonderful things they are, what enormous capabilities they have. You get out of bed every morning. You know it, but it's so usual a thing that you don't think of it. That's the way with all of the things we do, with all of our lives. So, when we think of life or adventure, it seems to us that we must have something unusual, something different from what we do every day. And to satisfy this demand, we are given fanciful pictures of life in books, in plays and in the movies. And we think that these fanciful pictures, these cherries, to go back to my illustration, really depict life and are the real strawberries. Do you see?"

"Yes," said Asenath, with her lips only. She was quite bewildered. The words were plain, their meaning was evident, but she could not understand it as a whole.

Larned saw that he had not succeeded in making the matter plain to her. He said:

"I'm afraid I haven't explained it very well. Tell me what you don't understand."

"I don't see what strawberries and cherries—" and there she stuck. She could not utter another word. A flush spread over her face, a mute, but eloquent, testimony of her confusion and embarrassment. Larned perceived it and felt guilty. He was conscious of a great feeling of tenderness towards this girl. He wanted to soothe her, comfort her.

"Oh! Let's talk about something else more interesting. There's no use in picking things apart like that after all. Do you like snowy weather?"

His tone, even more than his words, quite reassured Asenath.

She answered quickly:

"I just love it."

"How would you like to put on your things and go out for a short walk?"

"Fine," she answered. "I'll get my coat and hat and rubbers. I'll only be a minute."

She returned in only a little more time than she had said and they went out. It had stopped snowing and the sky had cleared. Tramping in the snow was delicious to

both of them. Giving themselves up to the exuberance of their spirits, they joked and laughed at everything they had in common. It was a most delightful half hour for both of them. When they returned to McBrides', Larned did not go in but stood on the step for a few minutes chatting. He was just about to go after arranging to call again on the following Tuesday evening, when McBride came up. Asenath introduced the two men. McBride was not unfavorably impressed by Larned.

"I've met your father," he said. "He's a fine man, square as they make 'em. I don't suppose he'd remember me though."

"He's all you say, Mr. McBride. I'll ask him if he remembers you. Your daughter says that your concern does business with him."

"Yes, for many a year. And it's a pleasure to work for a concern like that."

"Well, good-night," said Larned as he went off.

"Good-night," said the others and went into the house.

"He seems a fine young man," said McBride when the door was closed. "Did you find out what church he goes to?"

"They're Unitarians," said Asenath.

"Unitarians, hm. I don't think much of that church. They're as bad as Episcopalians, not that there ain't good people in all religions. Maybe you could get him to come to our church."

"I'll ask him," said Asenath doubtingly. She was delighted that her father approved of Larned.

Their walk in the snow had made a glorious ending to what had been the happiest evening she had ever spent. As she slowly undressed she took an infinite delight in remembering what he had said to her and how he had looked when he said it. Then she thought of the whole week which must elapse before he would come again. It seemed an endless vista of empty evenings. The days, except Sunday, were not so bad, because she was occupied and her work was a pleasure to her. Oh! If she could see him every evening, if only for a few minutes. Suddenly she thought of her failure to understand his explanation of the cherries and strawberries, for that was the way she remembered it, and was filled with apprehension. He must think her awfully dumb. No, not dumb, stupid. And the mere correction of this word gave her hope. She would learn from him. He would teach her. She would be worthy of his society. And in pursuance of this idea, she took up "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch" and began to read where he had left off.

She read very slowly, but with such great interest that she continued until long after her usual hour for retiring. Finally she fell asleep, sitting in her rocking chair with the book in her hand. She slept thus for about an hour and then awoke, much surprised to learn what had happened to her. She finished her arrangements for the night and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXVII

LARNED'S recognition of Asenath's mental limitations might have chilled his interest in her were it not for the fact that that interest was founded in no way upon that part of her personality. Her attraction for him was so certain that he could not help taking a most lenient view of her failure to understand his attempted explanation of the view of life offered by some writers of fiction. He began by admitting that it was a very poor explanation at best, and that it was scarcely fair to expect so inexperienced a girl to grasp immediately an idea which, after all, was shared by very few people.

When he had dismissed this doubt of her intelligence, he was at liberty to think of other things, of which he had plenty, and in the main he thought very little of Asenath during the following week. Every now and then she came into his mind, and he looked forward to his coming visit to her with pleasure.

Asenath opened the door for him on the following Tuesday. She had been waiting for his ring for nearly a quarter of an hour. The pleasure she expressed in her salutation added much to the charm of her appearance, and, as he took her hand, he was sensible of a sudden thrill at the contact of her smooth skin in his

fingers. Pleasant as he found it, he relinquished her hand almost immediately.

When they were seated in the parlor, he asked her how she had spent the week.

"I finished 'Mrs. Wiggs'," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not. What do you think of it?"

"I think it's just sweet. Isn't it fine how Robert and Lucy come together again just through the Wiggses?"

"Did you like that part best?"

"I liked it all. I didn't expect to read much of it at first. I thought I'd wait for you to read it to me, but I just couldn't wait. It was so interesting."

"Well, I've brought you another book, 'Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm.' I think you'll like that, too. Shall I read a little of it to you?"

"Oh! Yes. Please."

He read for half an hour. She was intensely interested and was sorry when he stopped with the remark:

"Now, let's talk. You can finish the book yourself."

"All right, but it's much nicer when you read to me."

Larned made no doubt of his ability to interest her in better literature than this. He was greatly pleased with himself for having hit the right note. He was moved to learn whether she had any particular ambition in life and asked her if she ever thought of what she would like to be when she was twenty-five.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Have you never thought about it at all?"

"No."

"You expect to be married, don't you?"

This brought a sudden memory of her broken engagement.

"When I was engaged to Jim, sometimes I used to think about what we'd do when we were married."

"What did you think you would do?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought we'd have a nice house, and go out to parties, and dances and—," she paused, wondering what Larned thought of such amusements.

"And the theatre?" he put in.

"Do you know," said Asenath, "I've never been to a theatre, except movies."

"How's that?"

"Papa never would let me go. He thinks they're wicked places. Are they?"

"I don't think so."

"He doesn't know I've ever danced. He thinks that's wicked, too. Do you?"

"No, I think it's a bore."

"Do you?" said Asenath with great surprise. "I think it's lovely. Have you ever tried it?"

"No," said Larned. "It's always seemed a silly thing to do; I've never had any time for it."

"I'm sure you'd just love it. I wish you'd try it."

Larned was surprised to find that he rather wanted to learn to dance, now that she had asked him. It seemed to him that it might be nice to dance with her.

As he was on his way home, he tried again to determine why he found so much pleasure in her society. He marshaled all of her attractions: her beauty, her ingenuousness, her pleasant voice, her obvious liking and admiration for him. But they were not enough, he felt, to account for the delight, it is not too strong a word, which he experienced when with her. "Oh! What's the use?" he said to himself. "I like seeing her and it certainly doesn't harm either of us, so I'll just go on until I'm tired of it." This last aspect of the matter was based on his previous experience with every girl who had interested him thus far.

One day in the week that followed, he had a sudden idea. Asenath's remarks about dancing came back to him as his eye happened to rest on an advertisement of private dancing lessons. He would take some lessons without mentioning the matter to anyone. He would probably never make use of his ability, were he to acquire it, but it would be better to refuse to dance because he had tried it and did not care for it, than to be compelled to refuse because he wasn't able.

He took a few lessons, found it easy to learn, and, besides, quite enjoyable. He was almost vexed with himself at first for taking pleasure in a thing he had rather despised, but this did not last long.

His visits to Asenath on Tuesday evenings had become a regular function to which he looked forward with increasing eagerness. He brought her a new book

nearly every week, gradually increasing the quality. It was a wonderful new world to her. She was often impatient during the day for the evening to come so that she might take up the story which she happened to be reading where she had left it.

She learned much from her reading without having any such intention. Larned had told her to write down the words she did not understand and show them to him. He defined them as well as he was able and, one evening, brought her a small dictionary and showed her how to use it. Asenath's vocabulary was thus improved, but it was bettered also by her unconscious adoption of many of Larned's expressions. When she read, she did as children do; she read with her lips and mentally pronounced each word. In this way she acquired many new expressions with which, at first, she much surprised Larned.

Not only did she learn words and their use, she learned much about life in general which she had never even suspected. There was a great deal in her reading which she did not understand, but Larned, who had a considerable strain of the teacher in him, had brought her to ask him for an explanation of anything which was not clear to her, and this gave an added zest to their weekly meetings.

One evening, in the early spring, while it was still quite cool, he had proposed a walk. Asenath complied at once and they turned their steps towards the centre

of the city. They were discussing, that is, Larned was discussing, some book which she had just finished and both of them were so much interested that they took no account of the distance they went. Suddenly, Larned noticed that they were in the centre of the district in which the principal hotels were located and were immediately in front of one of the popular cafés of the better class. He asked her:

"How would you like to stop in here and have a bite to eat. I'm hungry."

"All right," said Asenath, delighted, "if you don't mind my not being dressed."

"You're better dressed than most of the people you'll see in there," he said.

They went in and took seats in the nearly empty café. It was not quite ten o'clock. The waiter came and took their order. Larned went on with his talk, but Asenath's attention was not what it had been before. Her eyes were busy, for there was much to attract them. She took in the costumes above all, but nothing much escaped her.

The waiter came presently with the food they had ordered, and, as he left them after serving it, Asenath noticed the musicians taking their places. Shortly after, the music was heard and a few couples began to dance.

"Oh!" said Asenath, "I wish—"

"What do you wish?"

"Oh! It's nothing—nothing of any consequence."

"I wish you'd tell me," he pleaded.

"I'd much rather not."

"Please do," he insisted.

"Well, I was going to say that I wished you cared for dancing."

"Would you like to dance with me?"

"Very much, but you don't care for it and, besides, you don't know how."

"Would you be willing to try it with me?"

"Right here, before everybody?"

"Yes, right here. Are you game?"

"Sure," and she got up from her chair. Larned did likewise and presently they were dancing.

Asenath was completely surprised. She thought it wonderful. As a matter of fact, Larned was already a fair dancer, and with Asenath, to whom the exericse was almost like second nature, it was easy to dance well. She was perfectly happy. And he—he learned that to have Asenath in his arms was the most delicious sensation he had ever known.

"Tell me, Harold, when did you learn to dance?" she asked. They had agreed a few weeks before to address each other by their Christian names, but Asenath had not completely acquired the habit. She always thought of him as Harold, but, generally, when she was with him, she avoided the use of his name.

"You're teaching me now. Anybody could dance with you."

"Honest, when did you learn?"

"I told you. I'm learning now. How am I getting along?"

"Please don't kid me. Tell me when you learned."

"It's a long story, girl. Some day we'll take a week off and I'll tell it to you."

They danced a couple of times and then they went home. On the way Larned told her of his having taken a few lessons shortly after they had talked of it. He was very gay, and very happy, and he ornamented the account with every kind of folly that occurred to him. Asenath was supremely happy, for she was sure that he had learned to dance simply to please her.

When he had finished, she said: "You dance wonderfully. I'm so glad you've learned. Don't you just love it?"

"I'll have to admit that I was an awful ass about it. It's real good fun, provided—" He stopped, which was quite unusual with him. This time it was because he was about to say that it was good fun provided he might dance with her. He did not want to say it because it was too true. He felt that the pleasure was not mere dancing, but dancing with her.

Asenath took him up. She said: "Provided what?"

"Oh! Provided one's in the humor."

"I want to ask you a question," she said.

"Shoot."

"Father," she no longer said "papa," "asked me to ask you if you wouldn't like to come to our church next Sunday evening."

"That's easy. I would—not."

"He'll be terribly disappointed. There's going to be some special music."

"Anything that's any good?"

"Oh! Yes. We have some real good music at our church. The only trouble is Mr. Harmon, our minister, don't ever seem able to get off a short sermon."

"Is he a good talker?"

"Everybody says so."

"What do you think?"

"I never listen to him. I just sit and think about other things."

"And size up the women's dresses, I suppose."

"Yes, I do that, too. Usually there ain't much to size up though. Will you come?"

"Would you very much like me to?"

"Yes. If you think you won't mind it too much."

"All right, I'll come. Tell your father that you'll lead the lamb to the slaughter."

When Larned was on his way home that night, he felt so happy that he seemed to be treading on air. "What's got into me?" he asked himself. "I've never done anything like this before. Am I getting to be weak-minded? Oh! Well! What's the use of philosophizing over my sad state. I enjoy being with her and that's all there is to it. But all the same, she's the loveliest little girl I've ever met."

CHAPTER XXVIII

LARNED had not attended a Sunday evening service for quite a long time. His recollection of the last was indistinct, except on one point and that was that he had been fearfully bored. In spite of this, however, he looked forward to accompanying Asenath on the coming Sunday with a certain amount of interest, not a small part of which was curiosity as to her actual mental attitude toward the services.

Asenath had expected that he would call for her on Sunday evening, although no definite arrangement had been made. When the time came for the McBrides to go to church, she accompanied her father and mother, although she would have preferred waiting for Larned. However, McBride would not hear of her waiting. Going to church with him was like the time and tide, which are reputed to wait for no man. Asenath was quite upset, but did not venture to show her feeling to her father.

As they approached the church, she was delighted to see Larned waiting on the steps. McBride was quite as much pleased, although his feeling had an entirely different basis. With him it was pride in his church, the zeal of the missionary. With her it was the joy of being with Larned, the pride in being accompanied publicly by so seemly a man.

Salutations over, they seated themselves in the McBride pew. Larned was conscious that his entrance

with Asenath was a subject of interest to many of the congregation, but particularly to the younger element. He was somewhat amused, but Asenath, who was also well aware of the curiosity which Larned's coming with her had excited, was distinctly gratified. To her it seemed that whatever stigma Rawlings' defection had cast upon her was removed.

A few minutes after they were seated, the organ was heard beginning the first movement of Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise." It was well played on a fair instrument and Larned enjoyed it thoroughly. He remarked Asenath's complete absorption in the music and was somewhat surprised at it, for they had never discussed the subject of music at all, he having taken it for granted that she had no interest in it. He determined to speak to her about it.

In the anthem which followed, a standard work which the choir executed fairly well, her interest was also marked, but the subsequent hymn in which the congregation joined lustily, even if with considerable uncertainty as to pitch, seemed both to annoy and amuse her. At a favorable moment, she whispered to him:

"Ain't it awful?"

The short prayer, which came next, was of the usual order. Asenath, he was sure, had no thought for either the words or their meaning. This was also true of her mental attitude towards the Scripture reading. All of this, including the explanation, was of the regular kind.

It seemed to Larned that the majority of the congregation simply offered their physical presence as a mark of their devotion and went no further.

Then came the long prayer and the collection. The latter offered an opportunity for a few whispered remarks between Asenath and Larned regarding the anthem about to be sung.

Any musical enjoyment which came to Larned from the anthem was offset by the hymn that followed, in which the congregation again showed its utter disregard of the pitch.

To Larned, the sermon, on a text from the Scripture reading, was a beautiful illustration of sheer verbosity. Everything in it which was not hackneyed was inappropriate.

It was an extemporaneous affair and showed it plainly. Nearly two-thirds of it was devoted to dividing the matter into various heads, and almost all of the balance to subjects foreign to the thread of the discourse, and the very last part of it to an assumption that the previous statements had been proved. It was full of imposing expressions, all of them wearing the mark of age-long use. It was illogical, intemperate and, to Larned, ignorant.

What interested him was the congregation. Those who listened seemed to be caught by the sound of the phrases; there was no indication to him that the subject itself was brought home to them. But the majority of them, he was

sure, were not even listening. They simply sat there, accomplishing their devotion by their physical presence, as he had felt of them earlier in the evening.

It was a tedious half hour before it was over. There was an unmistakable air of relief throughout the church when the end was reached and the singing of the response by the choir, a sentimental hymn, was really music to their ears. It was well sung and offered a striking contrast to the congregation's performance of the hymn which followed.

The benediction lasted only a minute and its close was the sign for undisguised satisfaction. Some went away immediately, but a considerable number broke up into groups and exchanged news and opinions.

Larned heard Asenath say softly:

"Let's duck."

He was only too glad to obey this significant request, and hastily bidding good-night to the McBrides and thanking them, left the church with her.

"What did you think of it?" she asked.

"It was very interesting."

"Interesting? How?"

"It was interesting to see all those people who come there week after week and go through that same performance without thought, without any real devotion. I wonder what the minister must think, if he really can think, of the actual effect of his work. What's your opinion?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"What did you think of the sermon?"

"I never listen to them."

"You remember the text, don't you?"

"No, I wasn't paying any attention. I was thinking of something else."

"Did you pay any attention to the prayers?"

"No, I've heard all of them so often. They're all the same."

"See here, Asenath, hasn't this thing any meaning to you at all?"

"I don't know. I never think about it."

"Do you consider yourself a believer, a Christian?"

"Sure."

"Do you believe in the divinity of Christ, in the—?"

"Oh! Harold. Don't let's talk about all that stuff. It's bad enough to have to go to church all the time, without talking about it when you're through with it."

"All right, if you'll permit one more remark on the subject."

Asenath looked at him without replying, but her expression indicated her consent, so he went on:

"I imagine that you're about as much of a Christian as you are a Buddhist with the difference that you go regularly to a Christian church. Isn't that so?"

"I guess so," she said laughing, "only I don't know what a 'Bud—' what did you call it?"

"A Buddhist."

"—What a Buddhist is. Only, let's talk about something else. How did you like the music?"

"The hymns?"

"No, the anthems."

"They were fine and they were well done, too. Your organist is a good musician."

"That's the part I love—the music. But I hate the hymns—the way they're sung. Some of them are lovely, too. Don't you love this one?" and she began to sing one of the hymns that they had heard the congregation shout.

"Yes, it's fine. That's a theme by Haydn."

"Who was he?"

"A composer who lived about a hundred or more years ago. You're very fond of music, aren't you?"

"I just love it."

"Do you ever go to any concerts?"

"At the church. And Oh! Jim took me to a concert last year. It was wonderful. I wish I could play. But we haven't any piano."

"Maybe you'll have one some day."

"I hope so," she said.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Larned was the first to speak:

"Tell me," he said, "why did you want me to go to church with you this evening?"

"Oh! I don't know."

"You must have had some reason. You remember you said you particularly wanted me to go."

"I know, but—"

"But what?"

"Father was very anxious to have me bring you."

"What for?"

"I don't know just why."

"You must have some idea."

Asenath was embarrassed and, as was quite usual, took refuge in silence. Larned waited for a reply and, when he was assured none would come, said:

"Do you suppose he would like to convert me?"

This was too pointed a question for Asenath to answer equivocally. She knew that that was exactly what her father hoped for and she did not want to admit it. She could think of no way of evading it, however.

"I guess so," she said.

"Do *you* want to convert me?"

"No, but you know—" and she paused.

"Why don't you come out with it? I won't mind."

"You see you're a Unitarian—"

"No, I'm not."

"Why you said you were."

"No, I said that the only church my family ever attended was a Unitarian church. I don't go to any."

"Father would think that was even worse."

"What does it matter to him whether I go to church or not?"

"He's just cranky about it."

"What difference does it make?"

"Please don't ask me."

"But I want to know."

"I told you when you first came he asked me all about you."

"Isn't he satisfied yet?"

"Yes, but he's just crazy about going to church and all that."

"I suppose then if I want to continue calling on you I'll have to join your church. Is that it?"

Asenath was becoming frightened. She feared if this subject were carried to the bitter end that she might lose Larned's companionship, the finest thing which had ever come into her life. She was desperate. Oh! if she could only tell him what his friendship meant to her. If she could only make him see that nothing must come between them. But her tongue was tied. She could not tell him. All she could say was:

"No. Don't mind him. I'll never bother you with going to church again, never. Let's talk about something else."

"But I want to know whether or not your father objects to my visiting you. Does he?"

Asenath felt that something must be done. So she did the magnificent thing. She lied.

"No, he don't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"All right then."

Asenath had not been compelled to make a complete misstatement. McBride had not forbidden her to receive Larned. That would have been final as far as his coming to the house was concerned. What he had done, however, had been to speak of the matter several times to his wife, who had repeated his words to Asenath and had advised her to induce Larned to go to church with them from time to time. Mrs. McBride feared that unless this were done McBride would make Larned's further visits impossible. There was no half way with McBride in church matters.

After Larned had gone, making their usual appointment for the following Tuesday, Asenath resolved that she would not brook opposition in this matter were it offered. She would fight to the last.

Larned was much amused by McBride's attitude. He set it down to mere narrow-mindedness. He wondered how so lovely a girl, one with so many possibilities, with so much grace and charm, could ever have been born into such a family.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE reason for Larned's selection of Tuesday evening for his visits to Asenath was not mere accident. He had chosen it because it was one of the few evenings in the week which he had open. Every Monday and Thursday evening he devoted to teaching English in a night school for immigrants. The work was purely voluntary and it made a strong appeal to Larned because he believed that there was no surer method for the prompt development of an American civic spirit in these people than teaching them the language of the country.

Larned had not been entirely wrong in his first choice of a profession. He was naturally a teacher, but the teaching methods prescribed in the high school ran counter to his ideas. He felt that he could not do good work within the strict limitations which were imposed upon him by the authorities and he had therefore resigned.

But he really loved teaching, and, in this night school, he found work which suited him exactly. He was allowed to make his own rules and had the satisfaction of seeing his work prosper.

He had spoken about his teaching to Asenath. She was interested principally because it was Larned who was doing the work. But she had no interest whatever

in immigrants. To her, the word had only a disagreeable connotation. Foreigners were dirty, unkempt, undesirable; they seemed a lower order, something to be avoided as one avoided vermin. However, as her friendship with Larned grew and her understanding of life generally underwent some improvement, she gradually came to have a more sympathetic interest in the work that Larned was doing and actually began to take some little pride in his altruism.

One evening in April, when their friendship had come to be a settled thing, he suggested to her that she take a class of very young girls, factory workers, and teach them.

"What! Me!" she cried in surprise.

"Yes. Why not?"

"But I couldn't teach anything."

"You could teach sewing, couldn't you?"

"No, I wouldn't know how to start."

"Suppose I asked you to explain how this dress was made—you could tell me, couldn't you?"

"Of course I could."

"Well, if you could teach me, why couldn't you teach some girls who would naturally be quicker to understand sewing than I would?"

"I couldn't do it."

"But you ought to do it. You don't make any special use of your time. Besides, it would only be one evening a week."

"Please don't ask me. I can't do it."

Larned was becoming rather angry. He controlled himself, however, and said, without any evidence of his feeling except a slight quickening of his speech:

"But you haven't given me any reason."

"Please don't ask me," she said again. She was becoming excited, confused, hurt. The thing seemed monstrous to her. She would have willingly assented to almost anything that Larned might ask. She would have agreed, in advance and in perfect good faith, to do anything he wished, but this thing was impossible. She felt miserable, ignoble, unworthy, but what he asked her she felt she could not do. It was like asking her to cry out blasphemy in the middle of the church service.

Larned caught the expression of helpless misery which she wore and desisted from pressing her. But he was angry. He felt as though he had been rebuffed. He was ready to call her selfish, self-centred, what not. He sat in silence after her last appeal, too angry to speak for fear that he might say something which he would afterward regret. Asenath was silent, too. She would have given anything for the ability to explain herself, but it was beyond her.

After as much as one minute—it seemed much longer—Larned got up and walked over and looked at a picture of an ancient McBride, a "Crayon portrait," as such retouched, photographic enlargements are

called. He wanted to go away, and, at the same time, he was not willing to do so childish a thing. Since he had decided that he would not go away angry, and he was still too much perturbed to permit himself to speak, he gazed at the ancient McBride and wondered what aesthetic consideration could ever have moved men to wear chin beards with the upper lip shaven.

Asenath watched him in anguish. She was convinced that he must hold her in contempt; that she had surely lost his friendship. She waited as a guilty criminal about to have sentence passed upon her. If she could only explain why she could not do as he wished. If the words would but come. But they would not. At length, she found the silence intolerable and, getting up, she walked over to him, put her hand lightly on his arm, and said:

"I guess you hate me, don't you?"

Her touch, light as it was, was magically potent, but the plaintive misery in her voice was even more so. Suddenly, Larned understood, and turning to her quickly, laid his hand on hers, and said:

"Hate *you?* I should say not. I was in the wrong, not you. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? For what?"

"For getting angry. I was a fool."

"Don't say that, Harold, please," and then the words came. "I know I'm only a horrid, selfish thing. I know I ought to try to do a little for those poor people when

you do so much. But I can't, I just can't—" and, withdrawing her hand from his, she threw herself in a chair and gave herself up to tears.

Larned was extremely uncomfortable. Like practically every other man, the sight of women's tears moved him strongly. He felt that he must have been cruelly unreasonable to have occasioned such grief as this. He was filled with a great desire to assuage it, but scarcely knew how to begin.

Fearfully ashamed, Asenath was gradually regaining control of herself. What would he think of her? Not only was she selfish, disobliging, incompetent, but a miserable cry-baby as well. It was probably all over between them, and it served her right. She was unworthy.

Larned watched her without speaking until she began to dry her eyes. Then he thought he might trust himself to speak without much risk of producing another outburst.

"Asenath," he said, "please forget all about it. I was all wrong, insisting like that. Please put it out of your mind."

"Oh! Harold," she said, "what must you think of me? The first thing you ever asked of me, and then something I ought to be glad to do, and I refuse, just because I know I can't do it, because I'm too dumb—stupid, I mean—" she stopped, utterly at a loss to find words sufficiently condemnatory.

"Please, Asenath," he protested, "don't say another word on that subject. Let's go out for a walk."

"Harold," she went on, much excited and scarcely heeding his words, "I thought that there wasn't anything that I couldn't do if you wanted me to do it. Why, I thought that just because *you* would want me to do it would make me able to do it. Since you've been coming to see me, I've thought I was a different girl all the way through, and now—"

Larned took her by the arm, and, almost lifting her from the chair, led her to the door.

"Go get your hat and coat, we're going for a walk. Not another word," and he raised his finger in a mock-dictatorial manner.

Asenath did as she was bid. When they were on the street, Larned said:

"Now, I want you to listen to me. Not everybody can do everything. You know that. Everybody should know it. I know now that what I proposed is one of those things that runs counter to something in your personality, something over which you really have no control. Now, where I made an ass of myself was that I did not see this at first. You made it perfectly plain, I can see that now. I was wrong and you'll have to admit it and, what's more, you'll have to promise not to say one more word on the subject except that you forgive me."

Larned's words and tone completely reassured Asen-

ath and she smiled in grateful appreciation as she said:

"I believe I'd forgive *you* anything, but there's nothing to forgive."

"That isn't exactly what I meant, but we'll let it pass."

They talked of other things, and then Larned took her home. He did not go in, but bade her good-night a few minutes after they had reached her door.

He walked home a prey to most unusual emotion. He was sure now that Asenath not only liked him very much, of that he had been in no doubt for quite some time, but it was perfectly plain that she was completely devoted to him, if not actually in love. What amazed him beyond measure was that he exulted in it, was proud and happy. Could it be that he was in love with her? It would seem so, but this was so very different from anything he had ever imagined that it must be impossible. He knew, had known for many weeks, that she charmed him, fascinated him; he knew that she was increasingly present in his thoughts; that he looked forward to his weekly visits with the liveliest expectation. But was this enough? It couldn't be. There were too many things which claimed him, too many subjects in which he took an active interest, for him to believe that he was in love. To be in love meant complete absorption in the loved one, and that was certainly not his case. He was very fond of her, there was no doubt, and maybe this very fondness prompted

him to overestimate her liking for him. At any rate, it wouldn't do to judge too hastily, and certainly not when she was so much agitated as she was tonight.

If he thought that she was really falling in love with him, he argued, it would be his duty to take steps to see that it went no further. It would never do to lead her on, or even permit her to go on, in view of the state of his own feelings. At all events, he would observe her closely in future and at the first definite sign, he would take such steps as seemed to him suitable under the circumstances.

But he could not down a certain feeling of satisfaction that she had shown so much dependence upon him, that she owned so lively a desire to please him. He had noted, not without considerable pride, the improvement in her speech, the widening of her knowledge. He felt that it would be a great pity to leave her where she now stood, just when she was about to be able to make use of her mind. He was sure that the quality of her mentality was excellent; it lacked only training. And the missionary in him, and who is entirely without this quality, burned with the desire to complete his work, to help fit her for the position in life which her tastes and aptitudes undoubtedly fitted her. It would be a crime to allow so fair a flower to be stunted for lack of the necessary attention.

CHAPTER XXX

DURING the summer, their weekly meetings were continued with occasional interruptions. Larned had been on the lookout, on his first visit after that in which Asenath had shown so much agitation, for any symptom which might confirm his temporary suspicion that she was falling in love with him, but saw none. Asenath was gay, cheerful, and quite mistress of herself. She was perfectly satisfied to go on like this forever. She wanted him as her friend, her mentor. It was sufficient joy to be with him once a week. It was true that he was in her mind constantly; she did nothing, thought of nothing that did not take him into account. "What would he think of this?" and "Would he approve of that?" were questions which, while she never formally proposed them to herself, were still always present in her consciousness.

She had no desire to go out. She made no effort to make new acquaintances or to improve the few she had. She saw Susan regularly at the telephone exchange, they still took their lunch together, but there was no longer the same degree of intimacy between them. In the first place, Susan had now become a regular member of May Wilson's "gang," and all of her leisure was occupied in various enterprises of a social nature which these young folks were constantly arranging and putting into

execution, and, in the second place, Asenath had never felt willing to confide in her any further details of her friendship for Larned since Susan had intimated that he might be Rawlings' successor. Asenath could not have explained her reason for this feeling. As a matter of fact, she did not actually have any reason for it; she simply did not want to do it. And with Asenath, as has been observed, when she did not want to talk, she knew very well how to keep silent.

She was going to her uncle's farm for the one week of her vacation. She asked Susan to accompany her, but that enterprising young woman had made other arrangements and declined. Asenath was very glad that the week she was in the country fell within the two weeks that Larned would be away.

When Larned took leave of her on the evening of his last visit before his vacation, he had it on the tip of his tongue to ask her to write to him. He would have liked to have a letter from her, but he was mindful of his resolution to keep their friendship a friendship and no more. So he said nothing.

He felt some regret in the prospect of not seeing her for three weeks. To hide it, he affected more than his usual gaiety and this prevented him from observing the same emotion in Asenath. Besides, she was not accustomed to wearing her heart on her sleeve, as the saying goes. She did not respond to his humorous sallies with quite her usual appreciation, and he might have noticed

this and coupled it with a sense of regret on her part similar to his own had he not been so bent upon concealing it.

It was a sultry evening in early August, much too hot to make even the thought of any exercise bearable. So they sat on the doorstep and chatted about their coming vacations. Asenath had not much to say about her uncle's farm. It was an old story with her, and she looked forward to her visit with no pleasure except the prospect of escape from the heat of the city. Besides, Larned had been there and he knew about it. The one spot that meant anything to her she forbore mentioning, the brook at the side of which they had had their first merry talk.

Larned was going to the mountains where his parents were spending the month of August. He was enthusiastic at the prospect of spending two idle weeks in his father's company.

"You ought to know the 'old boy,'" as he called him affectionately; "he's the dearest fellow I ever met. We're just two pals together. Not a bit like father and son. It's much more like two friends of the same age. He's interested in everything I do. We read the same books and discuss them. We don't always agree, but in the main I think we do. You must meet him some day."

"Do you think he'd like me?" asked Asenath. She was willing to take Larned senior on faith. He was Harold's father. That was enough.

"I'm sure he would. In the first place, he's got a pair of eyes in his head, and if I told him you were a pretty fair looker, he would use those eyes so that he could see in you what I told him was there."

"What are looks good for, anyway?" asked Asenath.

"That depends. In your case they might mean much or little. Now if you were a good-looking girl instead of a homely one, I could tell you without hurting your feelings, but as it is, delicacy compels silence. What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About looks. Do you think they're good for anything?"

"I don't know."

"I do. But I won't tell you."

"Please, Harold, tell me."

"Never."

"Please."

"You want me to tell you that you're beautiful, don't you?"

"No, I don't.

"You'd be insulted if I told you, wouldn't you?"

"Don't be crazy."

"Yes, I will and I'm going to insult you. You are beautiful. I told you that the first time I ever saw you and I stick to it. They may shoot me at sunrise, but I'll stick to it."

This was delicious. Not merely the humor, which

Asenath thought wonderful, but the homage to her beauty.

Asenath did not reply to his compliment. She was always delighted to hear from him that she was beautiful; it gave her a sense of comfort; she felt like a cat who is enjoying the heat of a grate-fire in winter. She would have indulged in the human equivalent of purring if there were such a thing. Larned had told her this a number of times, and always she felt that she ought to make some denial, if only partial, but she never did. And he liked her the better for it. He would have taken it as affectation, and affectation in any form he despised.

"Oh! Isn't it hot!" said Asenath. "I always think I like summer until August, and then I hate it until winter comes again."

"It is hot," he answered, "but I don't mind it much. I like summer because I dislike overcoats and rubbers."

"I like it for one thing, I don't have to go to church."

This brought up an unpleasant memory for Asenath. There had been some more talk on this subject by McBride. He had been disappointed because Larned had not made any remark to him after his attendance at the Sunday evening service. McBride could not understand how anyone could come to their church and not be edified. He had said to his wife that unless Larned showed some interest in church-going, not necessarily to their church, he would see to it that his visits to Asenath should cease. He was not going to have his

daughter associated with a godless young man, no matter who his father might be. Mrs. McBride had repeated this to Asenath, who, for a moment, was much disturbed by it. She made no answer, however, and, remembering that the summer season was at hand, in which church activity was at a minimum, put the matter out of her mind as of no immediate importance. In practice, Asenath never crossed a bridge before she came to it.

Larned laughed at her remark and said:

"I thought you didn't mind going to church."

"I didn't mind it much before, but I hate it now."

"Why?"

"Oh! I don't know. I just don't like to go."

"Well, talking of going, I guess it's time for me to move along. It's after ten."

He got up and looked about him. On nearly every doorstep he saw groups of people kept outdoors by the heat. He saw them with his eyes only, his mind was on the coming separation. He hated to leave her. In her presence he always felt serenely happy. She seemed to fit into his every mood. It was never necessary for him consciously to entertain her. He would not have been able to explain satisfactorily why leaving her for so short a period as three weeks should bring to him so active a sense of regret. He had never had any such emotion before. Perhaps it was just the heat, after all, which took all the energy out of him and left him a prey to all sorts of foolish ideas. That must be it. And he mentally pulled

himself together and, in the most matter-of-fact manner imaginable, said:

"Well, Asenath, I hope you enjoy your visit to the country."

"Don't worry," she answered, "I won't."

"Maybe you will, after all. Good-bye," and he held out his hand.

"Good-bye," she said. Never had she felt like this. It seemed almost like the end of everything for her. Three weeks without seeing him was an eternity. Oh, if she could have held him, if she could let him know how she would miss him; that, away from him, she had no life at all, it was mere existence. But she said "good-bye" simply, with only a slight wistfulness as the nearest approach to an indication of her emotion.

The three weeks passed uneventfully for her. She went to the country and found it, in the main, an agreeable change. Her cousin was at home and the armed truce which they had always maintained was broken by only one or two little passages in the privacy of their room. Outside of their common apartment, they avoided each other as much as was compatible with the maintenance of peace in the family. There were some young men of the neighborhood, friends of her cousin, who came to call, but she found them almost unbearable. She measured them by Larned's standard and they suffered violently by the comparison. They pronounced her very dull and, in their company, she certainly was.

Every day she went alone to the brook with her sewing or a book and spent as much of her time there as she could. It seemed to her that she was nearer to Larned here. The impression that he had made on her that first day was the most vivid thing in her memory. She could see him now as he appeared then, with his good looks, his animated expression, his jolly humor. Here, she felt less removed from him; like most of us, she clutched at the frame when the picture was gone.

Larned's vacation was an almost unalloyed delight to him. He thought much of Asenath, more than he would have believed possible. He often wanted to see her, but it was a desire that he knew would soon be gratified, and, instead of causing him regret, it gave him a most pleasurable sense of anticipation.

He came back to the city on Sunday evening, and, on Monday morning, he found himself hurrying to the office so that he might be sure to arrive before Asenath. So early was it when he came, that it was necessary to walk up and down the block half a dozen times before he saw her alight from the car. She was also early.

The calm of their greeting was utterly out of key with their inward perturbation. Asenath had never been so excited and he was surprised at the strength of his own emotion. The touch of her hand electrified him, and for the first time, he knew what she really meant to him. But he did not philosophize over it, he simply rejoiced.

The few words they spoke were almost perfunctory.

Neither of them needed speech to express an emotion which completely controlled them. Neither of them felt any necessity to communicate their feelings to each other. To be together again was enough.

CHAPTER XXXI

THEIR regular weekly meetings were resumed and their friendship went on just as before. Both of them were conscious that there was something new in their relationship, a warmth of feeling greater than before. But they were quite content to allow this to remain unspoken, fearing almost that its avowal would interfere with the serenity of their companionship.

McBride waited, as he thought, patiently, for some change in Larned's attitude towards church-going. He had told his wife to inform Asenath of his desire in the matter and expected that she would take suitable action. Either Larned was to identify himself with some church or cease his visits. He was not accustomed to announce his wishes with regard to the action of the members of his family more than once and, consequently, he waited for some sign of obedience.

None came, however, and about the middle of October he took occasion to issue his ultimatum, this time directly to Asenath at the supper table. It happened on a Thursday evening; he had come to a determination on the way home from prayer meeting the evening before.

"Asenath," he said, "I haven't heard anything about young Larned's going to church lately."

She knew what was coming, and had determined to fight it, but, when the moment came, her life-long habit of non-opposition to her father prevailed and she was silent.

Her silence was no surprise to him. He was given to the same practice himself. Besides, he felt that there was really no answer to be made, he had stated a fact which required neither assent nor corroboration. He went on, after what seemed to him a suitable pause:

"I don't want him coming here any more. I don't want you to have anything to do with him."

Asenath was still silent, but inwardly she was in revolt. She hated him. She hated herself for her pusillanimity. To be compelled to sit there with her tongue tied when the dearest thing in her life was being taken from her. Oh! Why could she not assert herself? Why was she powerless to tell him that she would not submit to his tyranny. For the moment her hate of her father, her rage, consumed her, she did not think of anything else. She had no vivid sense of her loss or of the effect on Larned. All she sensed was hatred, she wanted to hurt her father, she would have liked to tear him, injure him physically.

But she sat at the table, dull, incapable. She could not eat, she could not talk, she could not think. McBride paid her no further attention. He had given his orders and that ended the matter. He went on with his supper, his conscience at ease because of his virtuous action.

It made no difference to him whether Asenath ate or not. That was her affair. When she came to her senses, as she was bound to do soon, she would eat if she were hungry. He did not notice her silence. He was used to that, he had not expected her to answer him. In fact, in his opinion, there was no answer to make. He did not require verbal acquiescence, he looked for obedience only, and he made no doubt that it would be forthcoming.

Mrs. McBride, however, accustomed as she was to accept his least word as final, was in a state of great excitement. She knew what a blow this would be to Asenath, and the maternal instinct in her filled her with pity, with a keen desire to lessen the violence of her pain. But the habit of years was strong upon her and she too sat silent, impatiently awaiting the end of the meal, so that she might talk to Asenath privately to give her the relief that speech would bring.

As soon as the meal was over, however, Asenath went to her room, without making any apology for not helping her mother to clear up. Mrs. McBride made no comment. She went about her work silently, in the greatest misery. She did not know what to do; whether to go to her as soon as she was through, in order to give her what comfort she could, or to await her reappearance. Perhaps it might be better for Asenath to work out her own salvation, perhaps she would rather be alone.

But she could not wait. When her work was finished, she went to Asenath's room. She expected to find her in tears, in lively distress, but instead she found her sitting in her chair, dry-eyed, wearing an expression she had never seen before. Asenath was still in the spirit which had mastered her while at the table. She was filled with a dull, implacable desire for revenge, and the recognition of her powerlessness merely intensified it. She gave no sign that she was aware of her mother's entrance, but sat still in her chair gazing at vacancy. Mrs. McBride wanted to be sympathetic.

"Don't take it so hard," she said.

"Don't talk to me," answered Asenath almost fiercely.

"I'm so sorry," said her mother, disregarding Asenath's remark, "I did everything I could, but you know your father. When he—"

"Yes, I know him and I hate him," said Asenath with vehemence. "I won't live in the same house with him. I'll run away and he can have his dirty old church all to himself."

With speech the tears came and, almost instantly, she was in a paroxysm of weeping. Mrs. McBride came over to her and put her arms about her. She did not resent Asenath's words in the least. She knew that she must have some outlet for her pent-up feelings, and, after all, it made little difference what she said. She was certain that, in the end, Asenath would do exactly what her father had ordered.

After a while Asenath regained sufficient composure to permit speech. Punctuated by sobs, which she made no effort to control, she said:

"Oh! How can I ever tell him? What will he think of me? He won't want to have anything more to do with any of us."

"There, there," said Mrs. McBride with the idea of consoling her, "everything will come out all right."

"All right," cried Asenath, "all right! What's he to you? What do you care? All you know is just to do everything that that old—" She paused. No epithet could she find in her vocabulary which was sufficiently strong to apply to her father.

"Oh! Assy," said Mrs. McBride. "What way is that to talk. I'm sure Mr. Larned is a very nice young man, but he ain't the only one in the world."

"He's the only one in the world I want. I love him. I'd do anything for him. I'd go in rags for him, I'd—"

This was a new phase. Mrs. McBride had not suspected anything of the sort. She knew that Asenath must be very fond of him, but she had no idea that her affection was as strong as this. She did not know what to say and silently stroked Asenath's hair, wondering if it might not be possible to do something to alter McBride's edict. But no, that was impossible.

"How can I ever tell him?" asked Asenath between fresh sobs. "What will he think of me? How can he expect that I'm any better than the rest of us? Oh! I

wish I was dead!" and she was seized with a new paroxysm.

And so it continued for over an hour. Finally, when she was calmer outwardly, Mrs. McBride left her and went to bed. But she did not sleep. Instead she thought in her vague, uncertain way of what had happened, quite oblivious of her husband's sound but sonorous slumber.

Nor did Asenath sleep. When her mother left her, mechanically she undressed and went to bed, and lay there open-eyed, appraising the calamity which had befallen her. For it was a calamity to her. Larned was her all. Now that it seemed that she must lose him, she was conscious of the fact that, almost from the beginning of his vists, he was her sole interest. She felt she could not face life without him, and, on the other hand, she did not see what she possibly could do to retain him. That he would cease his visits, and also cease to see her, she had no doubt. As soon as he heard McBride's edict, he would accept it in the spirit as well as the letter. Asenath was sure that he would never lend himself to meeting her surreptitiously. She knew he liked her, was very fond of her, in fact, but she did not dream that there was any possibility that he might return her ardent affection. To begin with, he was so immensely her superior in every way, intellectually above all; she felt him to be actually brilliant, and, besides, he was rich, his social position was established and he had ample interests.

He would be sorry, of course. She knew that he enjoyed their association keenly, she knew that he admired her in a way, her good looks for one thing. But he couldn't be in love with her as she with him. She believed that there was no sacrifice which she would not make willingly for his sake, but she did not think he felt so towards her.

At all events, he must be told. But how? She thought of writing to him, and, lying in bed, she endeavored to compose a satisfactory note, only to find that she could not do it. Then she determined to set out early the next morning in order to meet him as he reached the telephone building. She made a great effort to fix on some phrase with which to break the news without showing too plainly her great distress, but she could not do this either. Finally, she determined to await the event. And, having done this, she felt more composed, and eventually fell asleep as a clock in the neighborhood struck two.

On that morning, however, Larned was detained and did not reach the office until quite some time after his usual hour. Asenath had waited until the last moment and then gave up hope of seeing him until the next morning. But, while she was at her work, her trouble returned to her with such force and her desire to see him became so intense, that she resolved to telephone to him in his office if she could.

Pretexting the necessity of sending a message of

great importance, she had herself excused and called him on the telephone. She got her connection immediately. She was in a state of great excitement the instant she recognized his voice and knew that she could not telephone her message. Controlling herself as best she could, she said:

"This is Asenath. Can you see me at lunch time?"

"Sure," he answered. "What's the matter?"

"I can't tell you over the 'phone. Where will you meet me?"

"What time are you off?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"All right. Meet me at the corner in front of the drug store at five minutes after twelve."

"Five after twelve. All right." And she hung up.

Larned could not imagine what she could possibly have to say to him of sufficient importance to brook no delay. He had noticed that she seemed agitated, and he knew her well enough by now to recognize that agitation of any kind was most unusual with her. Serenity was one of her qualities which appealed to him strongly. He gave up, as quite useless, any speculation as to her news, but could not get it altogether out of his mind. He was quite uncomfortable about it, although he called himself a fool for worrying without real cause.

Promptly at twelve o'clock he left the office and reached the corner before she did. She was only a minute

behind him, and, as he saw her approach, he recognized in her serious expression that whatever her news might be, it was something of the utmost importance to her.

"Have you had your lunch?" he asked her as she came up.

"No, but I don't want any."

"If you want to talk to me, it might as well be over the table. How long do you have?"

"Three-quarters of an hour."

"That's plenty. We'll go into that restaurant over there; upstairs where it's fairly quiet."

They crossed the street and entered the restaurant. When they were seated and Larned had given an order, he said:

"Now, what is it?"

"Oh! Harold. I don't know how to tell you. Father won't let you come to see me any more."

"What's that?" he asked, utterly dumbfounded.

"Last night at supper, he said that you weren't to come to see me and I wasn't to see you at all."

"But why?"

"Because you aren't a church member. Oh! I'm so ashamed."

"This *is* serious," he said. And it was. He knew now how much she meant to him; in fact, he had known it ever since his return from the mountains. But he had been hugging the delusion that there was no use in being precipitate, their relationship had been ideal and

he wanted it to go on undisturbed, thinking that the test of time could not, by any possibility, be to their disadvantage.

Asenath was quick to feel his dejection and her heart leapt within her. He did care for her, she thought, and she was comforted. He would find a way.

"Tell me all about it," he said. "Had you any idea any such thing was impending?"

She told him the whole story, the little there was of it. When she had finished, he said nothing but thought deeply.

"Asenath," he said at length, "I want some time to think this over. I guess I don't have to tell you that I don't want to give up our friendship. Indeed, I won't give it up. But I must have some time to think it over. I'll find a way, somehow or other. Trust me and don't let it bother you."

She drank in his words as a balm. His manner, more than his words, assured her that her fear that he would accept her father's edict was groundless. She was almost happy now. She was sure of him. Instinctively, she knew that he loved her, and, with that knowledge, she was content, she could await the final event with perfect composure.

"I'd trust you—with anything," she said.

"Let's forget all about it for the present," he said. "Let's act as though nothing had happened. Meet me tomorrow same place, same time, and maybe I'll have something to say."

"Yes," she said.

"In the meantime," he resumed, in a jocular vein, somewhat forced, "I suppose I had better get a catechism and prepare myself for a religious life. What sect would you propose for me?"

"How can you joke about it?" she asked seriously.

"Why not?" he retorted. "I'm glad that I can joke about it. When you can see the fun in anything, there's still hope. How do you think I'd make out as a Baptist?"

"Oh! Harold!" was all she could say.

"The Quakers are a pretty good crowd," he resumed, "only I'm afraid the spirit would move me once too often in meeting and I might be put out."

After a while she fell into his spirit and was almost gay. It was always thus with him. His good humor was infectious and she was utterly without immunity.

When she left him, she was happy, serene. She had implicit confidence that he would find a way out of their difficulty.

CHAPTER XXXII

LARNED'S flippancy had been put on. He wanted time to think over the serious problem which confronted him. He knew he loved this girl and that he wanted to marry her. But he had not been sure enough of himself, he did not want to "Marry in haste to repent at leisure," he had wished to test her attraction for him thoroughly before they were committed. In all of their association, neither of them had ever, by any word or act, suggested that theirs was anything but a platonic friendship.

What was he to do? It was impossible to discuss the subject with McBride, if for no other reason than the maintenance of a decent pride. He was unwilling even to suggest to Asenath that they meet outside of her home. It was either all or nothing. If she were willing, they might be married without her parents' consent. That was easy; one hour could carry them into the neighboring State where there was a veritable Gretna Green, and, after that, the McBrides could suit themselves. Or they might wait for a few months and see how they felt then. But even as he thought of this alternative, he knew that he could not wait; he must see her, he must be with her.

He took the rest of the afternoon off and went into the country for a long tramp. He could always think better

when he was afoot, and this was no exception. The day was fair, the air cool and bracing and the country in its autumn garb was most lovely. He had walked for less than an hour when his mind was made up. If Asenath were willing, they would be married immediately. There was only one condition which he made with himself, he would talk it over first with his parents. He wanted them to know and approve. Of the latter he had no doubt whatever, for many experiences had proven that they would not interfere with any project of his to which he had given careful consideration. Advice might be offered, but opposition never.

That evening, after dinner, he told them the whole story in detail. He had spoken of Asenath to them before, but had never intimated, even in the slightest way, that she had any strong hold on his affection. They had been much interested in his descriptions of the McBride household, in his course of reading for Asenath, and had looked upon it as just another manifestation of his teaching instinct. They listened gravely to his recital, showing little of the surprise they felt, and, when he had finished, with the statement that he was about to propose marriage without the knowledge of Asenath's parents, they were both silent.

After a little while, Larned senior spoke:

"Harold, what you propose is a very serious matter, one in which I am afraid I cannot advise you. If you have given the question all of the consideration it

deserves; if you are sure that this girl will make you happy; if you are sure you can make her happy, I've nothing to say. It's your life which is at stake, your happiness. This is one of the things which every man must decide for himself. Nobody can decide for him. I would rather you had waited a little longer before reaching a decision, but even that is your own problem."

"I knew you'd feel that way, father," said Harold. "How do you feel about it, mother?"

"You know how I feel, my dear," she answered. "Your wife, whoever she is, will be my daughter as long as she wants to be. I hope you have chosen wisely both for yourself and her." She was much affected, and there were tears in her eyes, but she smiled brightly at him. For answer, he kissed her.

They discussed the details of Harold's contemplated action, based, of course, upon Asenath's acquiescence. It was arranged that immediately after the marriage they were to come to Larneds' and make their home there until such time as they should desire to set up an establishment of their own.

Promptly at noon the next day Larned was at the corner waiting for Asenath. His whole morning had been idle, for he could not work. His mind was made up and he literally burned to learn Asenath's decision. Although, in the main, he had no doubt that she would do as he wished, he had had no word from her which justified him in this belief and, occasionally, he found

himself wondering if, after all, her long-established habit of obedience to her father might not make her hesitate to take this final step.

But when he saw her approach, the look in her eyes convinced him that there was no basis for even the shadow of a doubt.

He greeted her warmly, and then:

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "Do you want to eat?"

"No," she answered, "why?"

"I don't think I could talk to you as I want to in a restaurant. Let's walk."

"Very well," she answered, and fell into step beside him. He searched his mind for a moment for a suitable beginning, and, finding none, plunged in without further thought.

"Asenath," he said, "I love you; I'm sure you know it, don't you?"

"Yes," she answered with great earnestness, "and I love you; I can't tell you how much. If I loved you before night before last, I more than love you now. You're simply everything to me."

There was no doubting her utter sincerity. Her great love for him had given her speech. He was much moved.

"I've loved you for quite a long time," he said, "but I wanted to make sure. I wanted to know, beyond the slightest doubt, that my love was fixed, final. I wanted to wait, to go on as we were until there could be no possible chance of making a mistake. But your father's

action has shown me that there is no doubt, and, further, that I cannot wait. Asenath, will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Will you marry me now—today?"

"Yes."

"Very well. There's a train at one o'clock that will get us to Berryville, that's right across the state line, at a little before two. We can go to a minister or a justice of the peace, be married, and catch the 3.15 train home. We'll go to my house, my father and mother know all about it and will be happy to receive you as their daughter. We'll send word to your father that we're married and where we are. That will put the next move up to him. Are you willing?"

And again Asenath said "yes."

At half past four Mr. and Mrs. Harold Prentis Larned entered the Larned house. Harold had telephoned from the railway station that they had decided and would be there at that time. So the senior Larneds were waiting for them and the welcome that Asenath received from her parents-in-law was so cordial, so tactful that all of her doubts in their regard vanished. She was much excited because, for the first time in her life, she had disobeyed her father, and her fear of him was great. All of Harold's assurances scarcely convinced her that he might not have some power to undo what they had done.

Shortly after the greetings were over, Asenath wrote the following note at Harold's dictation:

Dear Father:

I was married this afternoon to Harold Larned. I know you will be shocked to learn this and I am sorry that I have had to do what I am sure will cause you disappointment. But I had no alternative; between you and Harold, I had to choose him.

I hope you will forgive me and believe me to be as always

Your loving daughter,
Asenath.

We are staying at my father-in-law's house.

The letter had just been inserted in the envelope when Asenath uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" Harold asked.

"I wonder if I could put in something about my things."

"Oh! I wouldn't. It's scarcely appropriate. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll deliver the letter myself and bring back whatever you want. Will your mother know what to send?"

"Yes, she'll know. I haven't got so much."

And so it was arranged.

Larned, in his impatience to return, called a taxi from a neighboring garage and was soon ringing McBrides' bell.

His unsuspecting mother-in-law opened the door

almost immediately. She had been much concerned by Asenath's failure to appear. Never once, since she had been employed by the Telephone Company, had she missed coming directly home unless she had previously announced it. Today, when Asenath did not come in time for lunch her mother imagined that she had been detained in the exchange, but, as the afternoon wore on without her coming or sending word, she became nervous. Once during the long afternoon she was reminded of Asenath's threat to run away, but instantly put this idea to one side as inconceivable.

When she saw Larned standing on the step, she knew instantly that he had come to bring her news of Asenath.

"Where's Asenath?" she cried.

"She's at our house," Larned answered with extraordinary suavity, put on to cover the triumph he felt. "Here's a letter from her for Mr. McBride."

"What's she doing there?"

"The letter will tell you."

Nervously, she invited him to come in and bade him take a seat in the parlor while she ran upstairs to deliver the letter.

A few minutes later, McBride appeared in the parlor with the letter in his hand. His face was purple with suppressed rage.

"I want you to get out of this house before I throw you out," he said through his teeth. "Mother," he said to his wife, "show him the door."

"Good evening," said Larned as he left the room. As he was about to leave the house, he suddenly remembered that he was to bring some things for Asenath. He stood in the doorway and mentioned it to Mrs. McBride. She took the suitcase with which he had provided himself and whispered to him to wait on the step until she brought it to him.

It was fully five minutes before she returned. He thanked her and was already halfway down the steps when she whispered:

"Give her my love."

"All right. Thank you. Good-bye," he said.

As he opened the door of the cab, he took one last look at the commonplace dwelling in which he had spent so many delightful hours. To-day, it appeared to him for the first time in its true color, and he gaily reflected: "Why not, when *she's* no longer there."

He drove to a jeweler's shop and purchased a wedding ring. He did not have it engraved, because he could not be sure of the size. Then he drove home.

Asenath's pride in her ring was so manifest that all the Larneds were delighted. She was so simple, so ingenuous and withal so beautiful. Both of Harold's parents were most favorably impressed by her and were entirely ready to approve of Harold's decision in this as in every other matter in which he had been compelled to make a choice.

Asenath was entirely unaffected by what Harold

told her of his reception by her father, but she was touched by her mother's message. Quickly, however, she forgot both of them in her new happiness. To be Harold's wife, to have him take her in his strong arms, to receive and return his kisses was heaven.

They were both too ecstatic to make any ordered conversation possible. But there was no longer any need to justify their being together. They belonged together and physical contact was what their youth cried for, and not for either wit or wisdom.

They were a merry party at dinner. Larned senior produced a bottle of champagne, "The only one he owned," he said, which he had been saving for some "grand" occasion. In their excitement both Harold and Asenath had forgotten that they had eaten no lunch.

After dinner, the four of them continued their talk at the table for about an hour. Then Harold proposed a walk and Asenath eagerly agreed.

Hand and hand, and sometimes with his arm about her waist, they walked in the starlit night. Too happy to talk, they sensed each other's joy and were wonderfully content to be silent. Occasionally Harold would make some remark to which Asenath would return a monosyllabic reply, but that was all.

They were conscious of nothing but each other. They were supremely happy.

PART FOUR
ASENATH
CHAPTER XXXIII

SUNDAY morning breakfast was an event in the Larned household. It was a leisurely meal which began about ten o'clock and usually lasted until eleven. Harold had told Asenath about it in one of their talks, so she knew what to expect.

Asenath's eyes had been busy from the first moment of her entrance into the house. She had keen vision for design of any kind and a trustworthy visual memory. She liked the house, the simplicity of its decoration, the quiet tone of its colorings appealed to her good taste.

The Larneds lived very simply. Entirely as a matter of personal comfort, and not from motives of economy, Mrs. Larned kept but one maid. She declared to her friends that it made her housekeeping much easier. She was an extraordinarily fine cook herself and possessed the ability to impart her knowledge. She shared at least one quality with Harold—that of the teacher. Her house was always orderly without primness. One never had the feeling that to move a chair or a book from its place would make much of a change in the general effect. All of the rooms looked as though they had been arranged for use and comfort as well as

for their appeal to the purely aesthetic. They were not too orderly, and, on the other hand, they were never disorderly.

Of course, Asenath did not take these facts into her understanding. She was much too inexperienced for that. But she saw the details, noted the general effect and literally breathed the atmosphere. It was all as new and strange to her as could be; it was even a complete contrast to what she had seen in Mary Dunne's house. There the surroundings were luxurious. Although the general tone was one of restraint, the sense of the costliness of it all was unavoidable, while in Larneds' house one had no such feeling.

Asenath's reaction to these surroundings was instant. She felt comfortable, at home. It was as though she had come into her own. She could not have explained it; she did not analyze her feelings, she did not even identify them, she was simply at her ease.

This morning, as she came into the dining room, she was more beautiful than she had ever been in her life. There was a tenderness in her expression which lent a spiritual quality to her perfection of feature. Both Mr. and Mrs. Larned were struck with astonishment at the sight of her, while Harold found himself almost adoring her.

"Good morning, my dear," said Mrs. Larned, kissing her, "You look perfectly lovely this morning."

Asenath was delighted. She was touched by Mrs.

Larned's sincere admiration. "How lovely she is," she thought, but she said only "Good morning," accompanied by a smile which contained a world of meaning for the beholder, but which was simply the expression of a pleasure which lost none of its zest because it was inarticulate.

"Good morning, little girl," said Larned senior in his turn. He too kissed her and, as he did so, she contrasted her affectionate relationship to these almost strangers to the cold, matter-of-fact aloofness of her own parents. She was conscious of a great flood of tenderness for these dear people. It was apparent in her heightened color, in the quickness of her breath, that she was sensible of their open-hearted acceptance of her as one of them, as their daughter.

The breakfast was delicious and bountiful. The talk was gay and witty, but Asenath could not understand much of their badinage. It seemed to her that they couldn't possibly mean many of the things which they said to each other, but they were spoken apparently with perfect seriousness, even though they were received smilingly. "They must be joking," she thought, but still it seemed queer.

Presently her turn came. Harold said:

"Asenath, we'll have to hurry, or we'll be late for church."

"Church?" she exclaimed. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course. Don't you go to church every Sunday?"

"Oh! Harold. You don't mean it. *You* don't want to go to church."

"Of course not, but I'm perfectly willing to sacrifice myself. What church shall we go to?"

Asenath was completely bewildered. She did not know what to say. Mrs. Larned saw her embarrassment and rushed to her rescue.

"Don't pay any attention to him, dear, he's just fooling."

"Oh!" said Asenath with great relief.

"You really ought to punish him," said Mrs. Larned smiling, "you ought to take him at his word and make him go to church with you. It wouldn't hurt him anyway."

"Do you really think we ought to go?" inquired Asenath, anxious to please her mother-in-law.

"No, my dear. Not unless you really want to go on your own account."

"Oh! No. I don't want to go," declared Asenath with conviction, "I hate it."

During the afternoon Harold had an inspiration. He determined to ask for a special leave of one week for a short wedding trip. He made no doubt of his ability to obtain it and asked Asenath where she would like to go. She was willing to go anywhere, to do anything he wanted. She had never made any trip out of the city except to her Uncle's farm. Harold decided that she would probably enjoy New York more than any

other place within easy reach. She was highly delighted, for New York meant to her the capital of fashion, of luxury, of life on a grand scale. Suddenly it occurred to her that she was without suitable clothes. Harold, who knew nothing of such matters, protested that, with a face and figure like hers, she did not need any. While this discussion was on, Mrs. Larned came into the room and agreed with Asenath. So it was decided that the trip be postponed for two weeks, in which time the absolutely necessary apparel could easily be obtained.

Later in the afternoon, some of the connections and friends of the family dropped in, and Asenath underwent what she feared would be a trying ordeal, but which proved to be quite the opposite. She carried herself very well. As usual, she said little, but her good looks, her gracious smile won everyone who met her, and Harold was voted a lucky fellow.

Monday morning seemed a strange experience. She arose with Harold, breakfasted with him and accompanied him to the corner where he took the car. She watched him get into the car, waved her hand to him and then walked slowly back to her new home. She felt lonely and strange. Except for the hour during which they had been separated on Saturday afternoon, she had been with him constantly since their marriage. And with him, she could face the whole world. Affectionately as she had been received by the Larneds, she had

scarcely spent any time in their company alone. It would have been different, she thought, if she and Harold had a house of their own. She was sure that she could face solitude in her own house more easily than the society of Mrs. Larned in hers.

However, there was no course open but to go back, and so back she went. Mrs. Larned was waiting for her.

"My dear," she said, "let's come to an understanding as soon as we can. I want you to be perfectly comfortable here. I want you to feel that it's your home just as long as you want it to be. We musn't treat each other as company. When we want to be together, we can be together, and when we want to be alone, don't let's have any feeling that we can't do just as we please. Don't you think that will be better?"

"Yes," said Asenath. She was immensely relieved, Mrs. Larned made everything so easy.

"Now, I've my work to do. You know I only keep one maid regularly and I do a lot of the housework myself. I prefer it. Of course, I don't do the heavy work. I have a laundress who comes in two days a week, and a woman, who does cleaning for me, comes a couple of days. But I dress the beds and dust and do odds and ends. There's always a lot of them in every house. Now, you get a book or go out for a walk or do anything you please."

"Can I help you?" asked Asenath. "I used to help ma—mother."

"Some other time, perhaps, but not today. Remember you're a bride. You're entitled to take it easy for a little while."

"Mrs.—mother," it came very hard for Asenath thus to address Mrs. Larned in spite of the affection she had shown her, "do you think I could go to see my mother? Father will be at work."

"That's a fine idea. Do you want to go this morning?"

"Yes."

"All right. Run along. You'll be back for lunch, of course. One o'clock."

"Oh! Yes. I won't be long."

"Stay as long as you like, and if you should change your mind about lunch and decide to stay with your mother, just 'phone me."

"Oh! I'll be back."

"Tell your mother that I am sorry that we cannot make each other's acquaintance as yet, but that I hope we may soon be able to do so."

Asenath put on her hat and coat, which she had taken off but a few minutes earlier, and set out. She was surprised when Mrs. Larned offered to kiss her when she was ready to go, but she did not show her surprise and acted as though it was not entirely unexpected. Asenath could do these things because, though quick in her actions, she was never in a hurry; she did nothing precipitately.

But, as she walked down the street on this bright

October morning, she again made the contrast between Harold's parents and her own. It was sufficient for her to establish the difference in her own mind. It did not occur to her to go below the surface and seek the reason.

She was most anxious to see her mother. In the first place, she was drawn by a perfectly natural instinct, and in the second, by far the more powerful, she felt the need of recognition of her success in marrying a man of so superior a station. She knew that she could look for admiration of her exploit only from those of her own condition in life. From those in a superior position she would be considered merely lucky. At the risk of appearing tedious, it is necessary to state that these reasons were not apparent to Asenath. All that she recognized was that she wanted to see her mother.

And so much did she wish to see her that, when she had left the car, after what had seemed an age-long ride, she fairly ran. Her ring was answered promptly, but to her, to whom it appeared that two months rather than two days had passed since she left home, the wait was unending.

"Assie," exclaimed Mrs. McBride, as she opened the door. There was no mistaking the welcome, the happiness in her tone. "Is it really you?"

"It's me all right," answered Asenath, following her mother into the house. "I thought I'd run over to see how you were while papa's out."

"I'm so glad you've come. I've been dying to see you. But Oh! how could you ever run away like that?"

"What was I going to do? Papa said Harold couldn't come to the house to see me and I couldn't see him anywhere else. So I told him on Friday noon, and he told me to wait until Saturday the same time. So, on Saturday he met me again at the same place and we talked it all over and went right off to Berryville and got married. See?" She held up her left hand so that her mother might see her ring.

"Go on," said Mrs. McBride, wildly curious. "What did you do then?"

"Then we went to Larneds'. Oh! they're the loveliest people. Mrs. Larned, I just can't get to calling her 'mother,' is just as sweet as she can be and Mr. Larned's just grand. I wish you could meet them. Oh! I forgot! Mrs. Larned told me to tell you that she hoped she could soon meet you. You'd love her. Is papa awful mad at me?"

"He won't even let me talk about you. Oh! It's been awful lonely in the house without you. What kind of a house is Larneds'?"

"It's beautiful. You'd just love it." And so on.

For a full hour they sat in the parlor, Mrs. McBride constantly questioning and Asenath answering. When Mrs. McBride finally ran out of questions, Asenath said:

"Well, I guess I'd better be going. We have lunch at

one, and we're going shopping this afternoon. I'll just run upstairs to get some of my things."

"I'll come up with you and help you wrap them up."

When they were upstairs, Mrs. McBride did all the work while Asenath directed. She also carried the package downstairs while her daughter followed, putting on her gloves. When Asenath was on the step and ready to go, Mrs. McBride said:

"You'll come often, won't you?"

"Sure," answered Asenath. "So long." And off she went, perfectly satisfied. She had seen admiration of her and her achievement in her mother's eye. She knew that Mrs. McBride would neglect her ironing in order to lose no time in communicating the news, in full detail, to her sister around the corner, and that, in an ever widening stream, it would flow to all who knew them.

In the afternoon, Asenath quite surprised Mrs. Larned by the certainty with which she chose the various items of dress of which she stood in need. Mrs. Larned was also surprised and pleased by the good judgment she displayed in her selections. It seemed to her that Asenath was very economical, but, to Asenath, who had never spent more than ten dollars at one time in her life, it seemed that they were disbursing a fabulous amount.

She had never imagined such joy in shopping. It is true that she had always had the pleasure of anticipa-

tion of the final result when she and her mother had searched until they found the very best thing their scanty funds would buy, but she had never taken any great pride in accomplishing the confection of a beautiful dress for ten dollars, which would have cost the average purchaser three or four times as much. She sought the end, to be dressed according to her taste; the limited means were simply a disagreeable necessity and no source of satisfaction in the result.

Their shopping was very comprehensive, and Asenath enjoyed it, but long before it was over, she became impatient. The time was approaching when she would see Harold, and beside him, even shopping, with apparently unlimited funds, was not interesting. She was afraid that he might reach home before them, but this fear was groundless, as they preceded him by fully fifteen minutes, the last five of which Asenath spent in the hall near the front door so that she might hear his key the moment it entered the lock.

When he opened the door, she was waiting behind it. She threw her arms about his neck, kissed him rapturously, and then laying her head on his shoulder she whispered, "Oh! Harold. I love you."

He was transported with delight. The day had seemed endless, but this was a sufficient reward for any trial.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE one event of her life which always took the place of greatest prominence in Asenath's memory was her marriage and particularly the manner of it. Not second to it, but near it nevertheless, was her wedding trip. She had acquiesced in the proposal without a great deal of interest of her own, just as she would willingly have agreed to anything Harold wished. At the time that he had suggested their making a trip, she was so perfectly happy to be able to be with him constantly that she would have been equally pleased had he proposed to obtain the week's leave of absence and spend it at home.

But two weeks later, when she had become somewhat accustomed to being with him constantly outside of office hours, the prospect of going to New York with him took on a very brilliant hue. For several days before they went, it was practically her only preoccupation outside of Harold.

Seated in a Pullman for the first time, Asenath saw the world from a new angle. It was like her first ride in the Dunne limousine. She was delighted with it. It seemed as though she had always wanted to travel exactly like this, among people whose manner and dress betokened financial ease if not wealth, without jostling or crowding, and, above all, without any poor looking

people in view, no crying babies, no immigrants or negroes.

The trip to New York was a matter of but a few hours. In the station they boarded a taxicab and were carried to one of the fine new hotels. Asenath was immensely impressed with the luxury of it all and when they were shown into their rooms she dropped into an armchair with a sigh of contentment.

"What is it, dear?" asked Larned.

"Oh! It's lovely here. I never thought a hotel could be so fine."

"Have you visited very many?" he asked with an air which showed Asenath that she was to take it as a joke.

"Yes, I've been in the Mohawk Hotel."

"Where's that?"

"That's the hotel that Uncle William goes to near his farm. It's in the town nearby."

"It must be a fine joint."

"It's a joint all right. It's filthy. He took me in the parlor once to wait for him while he saw a man, and it looked as though it had never seen a broom."

"We had better look this place over very carefully and see if it's any better."

Asenath laughed in glee at the comparison.

"By the way," said Harold, "I don't remember your uncle very well, you know I didn't see much of him the day I met you at his place, but it seems to me that I recollect him as one who would likely want to 'see a man'."

"I don't know what you mean," said Asenath, seriously.

Harold laughed. "Why, that's an expression that's used to indicate that a man's going to take a drink."

"Do you know," said she, still seriously, "I never thought of that, but I have heard that uncle sometimes did that. Father told mother about it one time and she was awful mad, but she didn't say anything."

She got up from her chair and went over to the window and looked out on the mass of buildings. Off to the west, she saw the Hudson River, and, on the other side, the Palisades, behind which the sun was setting in a sky of splendor.

"Isn't it beautiful," she said, much impressed. Harold came to her side and put his arm about her. He recognized her sensibility to beauty and was deeply content with her. What a rare personality was hers, how perfectly natural was her taste for the really beautiful. He wondered that the child of so prosaic a pair should be so gifted.

Silently they watched the slowly changing sky until the last color had faded from it. Then they turned back into the room. Harold switched on the lights, and once more they were in the practical world.

"Do you know what we're going to do this evening?" he said, and then, without waiting for an answer, went on: "We're going to the theatre. David Warfield's here in 'The Music Master.' Everybody says it's fine. How does that strike you?"

"Great," said she, delighted.

"This will be the first play you've ever seen, won't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll run down into the lobby and get the seats while you begin dressing. Put on your glad rags. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He kissed her and went off, to return in about ten minutes.

"Who do you think I met down in the lobby?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered. "Tell me."

"Wallace Graham."

"I don't know him."

"Yes you do. Don't you remember? He was with me on that motoring trip last year. He was at your uncle's farm when I was there."

"Oh! Yes, I remember now. But I had forgotten his name."

"He's here with his wife. I knocked him all in a heap when I told him I was married and to whom. They're stopping at this hotel. I've arranged to meet them after the show. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," she answered. She was glad to meet any of his friends. To be introduced as Harold's wife was a source of the greatest pride. She felt that everyone must share her admiration of his great qualities, and what she took as a public recognition that she had been thought worthy of such a paragon was the most satisfying compliment she could possibly imagine.

When they entered the brilliantly lighted restaurant of the hotel, both of them were conscious that Asenath's beauty imposed itself upon many of the diners. Harold was amused at his own satisfaction at this homage. He knew that he would be quite ready to disclaim any interest in what anyone might think about such a matter, but yet he knew that he was proud to escort so beautiful a girl, and was pleased at the general recognition of her beauty. Asenath's emotion was very simple. She was delighted. The public approval was the sweetest incense in her nostrils, but she gave no sign of having perceived the interest she excited and followed the head waiter with as little appearance of self-consciousness as could possibly be imagined.

Halfway through their rather simple dinner, Graham came to their table. Harold saw him approaching and told Asenath. It was not necessary, however, to prepare her, for she recognized him at almost the same moment.

"How do you do, Mrs. Larned," said Graham. "You and Hal have given me quite a surprise."

"It was rather sudden," said Asenath. She was conscious that Graham was taking her in from head to foot and she knew that his impression was favorable.

"Sudden! I should say it was. I never had such a jolt in all my life."

"You're married, too, aren't you?" said Asenath.

"Oh! That's an old story now. We're an old married couple. Nearly six months. We're going to meet you

after the show, you know. Mrs. Graham's awfully anxious to know you. She always was kind of soft on Hal until I stepped in and cut him out."

Asenath took this quite seriously but gave no sign. Instead, she wore her usual charming smile of interested attention.

"Don't you believe him," put in Harold. "Wally never could have cut me out if I'd had any chance at all. Louise, that's Mrs. Graham, couldn't see me at all."

Asenath made a mental note to ask an explanation later. She was very curious as to Harold's friends, particularly those of the opposite sex, but had never been able to get much information from him. He always declared that none of them had ever interested him enough to enable him to remember much about them. It was quite true.

Graham remained only a minute altogether. When he left, he said:

"Well, I'm sure I wish you much joy, Mrs. Larned. And I believe you'll have it. Hal's one of the best fellows on earth."

"Thank you," said Asenath. She was delighted. Ah! This was life indeed, to meet people like Wallace Graham on a footing of easy familiarity under circumstances like these. She glanced about the room, with every table occupied by men and women in evening dress, with the deft waiters moving quickly over the thick, soft carpet. Everything bespoke luxury, elegance, and, to her, refine-

ment. She noted the fine tone of the decoration, the richness of the linens, the tableware. Every detail fitted perfectly into the general scheme, but her eye was quick to recognize each individual point and her interest stored it in her memory.

"Shall we walk to the theatre?" asked Harold when they had finished. "It's only a few blocks."

"Whatever you like," she answered.

They went out into the brilliantly lighted street thronged with pedestrians, with automobiles moving in a steady stream in both directions. As they walked slowly along the pavement, Asenath saw more types than she had ever imagined could be brought together in one city. Every condition in life seemed to be represented, from those in evening dress to the beggar in tatters. She breathed deeply, exhilarated by the very intensity of the life she saw about her. She was gay, happy, contented beyond measure.

The theatre seemed a wonderful place to her, and the play, from its very beginning, possessed her. To her it was real; she entered fully into the emotions portrayed by the actors, particularly those of the central character. When the little musical piece, supposed to have been composed by him, was played, its beauty so overpowered her that she was no longer conscious of her personality as an auditor, she simply lived in the play.

The intermission between the acts came as a shock, and it took the best part of a minute for her to come

back to herself. Harold spoke to her, but she scarcely heard what he said.

When the curtain descended on the happy ending, she sat silent, still enthralled by what she had experienced. Harold stood up and picked up her wrap. Almost in a dream, she arose, put it on and followed him to the street.

"How did you like it?" he asked.

"Oh! It was beautiful. I'm so glad it came out all right."

"It was all real to you, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, and it seems real yet. How can a man like Warfield do that every night? I'd think it would kill him to go through all of that so often."

"I don't imagine he feels about it the way you think. You know it's only acting."

Asenath was silent. She feared that she was treading on dangerous ground. She felt that Harold did not look at the play as she had seen it; that it had not gripped him as it had her. She would ask him about it later.

They met the Grahams at one of the fashionable cafés. Asenath was immediately aware of a well-concealed hostility towards her on the part of Louise Graham. She could have stated no reason whatever for her conviction as to the existence of this attitude, but she knew it was there. Louise's manner towards her was perfection. She was neither over-formal nor reserved. On the contrary she was tactful and showed

apparently the greatest amiability and interest. She was the daughter of a man of great wealth; had always been surrounded by people of culture; had been really educated both at home and in fine schools; had read much and, for so young a woman, had thought much. She talked well, was perfectly mistress of herself and indicated her quality in every word and action.

She had an expression of great intelligence, which lent charm to her rather plain face. She was distinctly not homely, but her features were irregular; her nose was too small for her large mouth and her chin was too long. She was dark, of rather less than medium height, slender without being thin, had good hands and feet. She dressed well and wore her clothes with distinction. Asenath took in all of this almost at a glance, and Louise did as much for her.

They ordered some light refreshments and began a rather flippant conversation devoted mainly to persons of their acquaintance. This left Asenath out of it for the most part, but Harold explained to her, from time to time, who the people were whom they were discussing, so that she might not feel herself outside of the group, and, really, she enjoyed herself thoroughly.

But this sort of talk has its limits, and, after about fifteen minutes of it, Louise asked Harold how he had enjoyed the play. Actually, while he had enjoyed Warfield's fine character work, he had found the play artificial, untrue to life, and, in many respects, cheaply

melodramatic. But he remembered Asenath's unsophisticated delight in it and did not wish to destroy her illusion.

"It was nice," he said. "I think Warfield is particularly good. So good, in fact, that I believe he might shine in a more serious role."

"Oh! Warfield is fine," she answered, "but I'm interested in what you thought of the play itself."

"Without Warfield," said Harold, "I suppose there wouldn't be anything to it at all. But with him the play strikes a popular note and therefore it must have some merit, even though it's one which doesn't appear to us."

"I think it's a bad play," said Louise, "because it's not true to life. It's hackneyed; all of the worn-out claptrap of the stage is used. And for what purpose? Is there any lesson in it? Is there any food for thought?"

"What you say is quite true," agreed Harold. He saw that Asenath was listening to the words, but without comprehension. He felt that the conversation was slipping away from her and was somewhat troubled. He wished her to have a perfectly delightful evening; he wanted to have no flaw of any kind in their honeymoon, her education might come later. With her good mind, that would be easy. He went on: "But why quarrel with the public taste? The public has a right to choose its own amusements, certainly if they're not

harmful. What are you folks going to do tomorrow? Have you any engagements?"

"Just wait a minute," said Louise, "we'll talk of that directly. But first, I want to answer what you said about the public taste. I don't agree with you at all. The public shouldn't be allowed to stupefy itself with sickly sentimentality of the sort that this play and many others simply reek with. At least, that's my opinion. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Larned?"

Harold was most uncomfortable. He found himself excited, anxious. He was afraid that Asenath would be embarrassed, would feel shame at her inability to understand the tendency of the discussion. He was sorry that he had consented to meet the Grahams. He knew that Louise was something of a blue-stocking, but he had thought that her good taste would have kept her from putting Asenath in a false position. All of his anxiety sprang from self-consciousness, from a form of vanity, but naturally, he did not recognize it.

Asenath did not answer immediately. There was a pause of perhaps five seconds before she said:

"I don't know. I never saw a play before. I thought it was lovely."

Harold was greatly pleased by her answer, with its utter lack of affectation of any sort. She was sincere and true and she had a good mind. She would learn, and then, let the others look out.

The conversation turned to other subjects. Asenath

had not much part in it but enjoyed it nevertheless. The party separated shortly past midnight after arranging for an automobile trip through the park and into the country for the following afternoon. The next day being Sunday, the variety of entertainment at their command was somewhat limited.

When they were again in their room at the hotel, Harold sat down in the armchair while Asenath took off her wrap and hung it carefully in the closet.

"How did you enjoy the evening?" he asked.

"It was lovely," she answered. "I've never had a better time."

"How did you like Louise?"

"I don't know. She's awfully smart, isn't she?"

"She's very clever, and very well educated, too."

"I felt like a dummy sitting there while she was talking about the play. I wanted to tell her what I thought about it but I just couldn't."

"Why couldn't you?"

"I don't know. I just couldn't say a word."

"Well, what you did say when she asked you was all right. It was honest and straightforward. You didn't pretend that you had any opinion. I was delighted."

Asenath glowed with pleasure. After a short pause, she said:

"She don't like me."

"What makes you think that?"

"I just know she don't."

"But how do you know?"

"I can't tell you how I know it, but it's true just the same."

"Feminine intuition, I suppose."

She did not answer, but came and sat on the arm of his chair. He took her hand and stroked it. Presently she leaned over and kissed him, a long, intense kiss. Then she began to stroke his hair.

"Dearie," she said, "I want to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"You won't mind what I say. Will you?"

"Certainly not."

"Are you very rich?"

"Lord! No. What put that in your head?"

"Well, I was thinking of the lot of money we're spending on this trip, and I wondered whether you were rich."

"I see. You think I'm extravagant?"

"No; I wasn't thinking of that."

"What were you thinking of?"

"I was thinking of how different I am from when I was engaged to Jim."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Why, when I was engaged to him, all I thought about was what he could give me, a fine house, and servants, and dresses and an automobile and all that, but with you—," she paused.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, with you," she resumed slowly, "all I want is you. I wouldn't care what else happened to me so long as I had you." And she threw her arms about his neck and clung to him.

Harold was moved as never before. He was exalted, and as he clasped her in a tight embrace, he humbly hoped that he might always deserve her complete devotion.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE rest of their visit to New York was most delightful to both of them. To Asenath, everything was new, one long train of joyful experiences, while Harold enjoyed not only what they did but her pleasure even more. They went again to the theatre, to the opera, which Asenath enjoyed more than anything else, and to a concert or two. They walked, drove, ate at all sorts of restaurants.

But, in spite of the constant novelty, and notwithstanding her enjoyment of every moment of their trip, Asenath was more than willing to come home at the end of the week. She disclaimed being tired, and physically she was not so, but mentally she was. It seemed to her that it would be the finest thing imaginable to have Harold with her in their own rooms with no thought of the outside world.

And when they came into their rooms they found a delightful surprise awaiting them. They had been completely refurnished in every detail. Asenath saw now, why, during their shopping expedition, Mrs. Larned had questioned her so closely regarding her taste in furnishings. It seemed to her that a more beautiful arrangement could not be possible. So much moved was she by this fresh evidence of the generous affection which was offered her that she could do

nothing but go to her mother-in-law and, putting her arms about her, kiss her on the mouth.

"You're so good to me," was all she could say.

Their life was again what it had been for the two weeks before their honeymoon trip. Harold went to work at his usual hour, Asenath always accompanying him to the car. When she returned, she would do some housework, go out, perhaps to see her mother, or read, or any one of quite a number of things.

The first Monday morning after their return from New York, Mrs. Larned said to her:

"Asenath, my dear, I'm delighted that you are so much pleased with your rooms. I want you to consider them as your particular home. The rest of the house is for all of us, but your rooms are your own. I know you'll want to take care of them yourself. You can dress the beds and do the dusting every day. Once a week they ought to be cleaned thoroughly and then you can have Mrs. Murray, the cleaning woman, to help you. What do you think of that arrangement?"

"I think it's fine," she answered.

For several weeks Asenath followed this programme assiduously. She took a great pride in their rooms and was most particular at first to keep everything spotless. Gradually, however, the novelty wore off, and she became rather careless. One afternoon, when she had called to Mrs. Larned to come up to look at something or other, it was quite apparent that the room had not

been dusted, and Mrs. Larned was quick to perceive it. She also noted that Asenath's clothes closet was in great disorder.

After a little thought, she decided to speak to Asenath about it, and did so with the utmost kindness, with no shade of reproof in her tone or words. Asenath did not show the annoyance she felt, but she did feel it keenly. She admitted that she was at fault and promised to do better in the future.

For a few weeks she was again very particular in the care of her rooms and then she began anew to lessen her efforts, with the result that the disorder of her closets and drawers was worse than ever. The one thing about which she was particular was Harold's clothes closet and chiffonier. But that was for him; for herself, it did not matter.

Mrs. Larned had gone up to Asenath's rooms several times after she had called her attention to the lack of orderliness. She had been reassured at first, but as time went on and the slovenliness returned, she was grieved, but resolved to say nothing. At one time when she was in the rooms, it was in the evening and the whole family was there, her eyes had unconsciously followed Asenath, as she opened the door of her closet for some purpose or other, and noted the disorder within. Asenath saw her glance and reddened as much with anger as with shame.

After the older Larneds had gone and Harold and Asenath were making ready to retire, she came over to him and said:

"Dearie, will you do something for me?"

"Certainly, what is it?"

"I don't want to live here any more. Can't we have a house of our own?"

"What's the matter with this?"

"I wouldn't care how little it was, or where it was, even if it was on a back street, only so that it would be just yours and mine with nobody else in it."

"You surely don't object to anyone in this house, do you?"

"No; but—"

"But what?"

"Oh! Don't ask me any question, dearie, please."

"Asenath, something's wrong and I want to know what it is."

"Please don't ask me. I'm sorry I said anything."

"But I want to know." He was becoming somewhat angry, although he maintained an even voice and raised it only slightly. "You must tell me."

"I'm not satisfied here." She was almost on the verge of tears.

"I want to know what's wrong," he said firmly. "Tell me why you're not satisfied. I insist."

"Your mother's always picking on me," she said. The tears were already in her eyes and there was a promise of more to come.

"My mother!—picking on you? What do you mean? You must tell me exactly what she said. Do you hear?

he continued, as Asenath did not answer but instead gave herself up to silent weeping.

"Asenath," he said, quite loudly now, "stop that crying and tell me what my mother found fault with."

But her only answer was more tears. She was now sobbing, and Harold, who had had practically no experience of women's tears, had a sudden revulsion of feeling, a sudden return of tenderness towards her to whom, but a moment before, he had been so stern. After all, she was only a child, and she would have told him in due course without compulsion. He took her in his arms and tried to soothe her.

"Don't cry, my dear, please don't cry," he said. "You may tell me or not, just as you please. I'm sorry I spoke so roughly to you. Please forgive me."

"Oh! I'm a wicked girl," she said at last, through her tears.

"Wicked? What do you mean?"

But the only answer was a new flood of tears which, while copious, was soon over. When she was quieter, he asked her:

"What makes you say you are a wicked girl?"

"Your mother don't like the way I keep our rooms and I don't keep them right. I'm a lazy, good-for-nothing girl. I wish I was dead. I'm no good to anybody." Again she gave herself up to weeping.

By this time Harold had learned that he would gain more by waiting than urging, and so made no effort to

induce her to speak. Instead he stroked her hair, and, presently, he was rewarded for his patience.

"Aren't you ashamed of me?" she asked.

"No, my dear, not at all. Has my mother complained to you about the way you keep our rooms?"

"No, she spoke to me once and I did them better for a while, but this evening when she and father were up here she watched me when I went to the closet and she saw how sloppy it was, and I was so ashamed that I wanted to run away."

"That's very foolish," said Harold, kindly.

"I know it is," she answered, "but Oh! Harold, can't we have our own house some time?"

"Some time, but not just now. I want to save some money first. Besides, it wouldn't look right if we went so soon after the folks went to all the trouble to fix up these rooms."

"That's so," she agreed. "It would be horrid. Please forget how silly I was, and how mean," she added.

"Are you sure that that's all?" he asked.

"Yes, your mother has been just lovely to me. I don't know what got into me. I must have been crazy. You don't hate me, do you?"

"Hate you? I guess not," and again he took her in his arms. But this time she was smiling and happy in his love.

Mrs. Larned had noted Asenath's rise in color when she saw that the disorder in her closet had been observed.

She was shrewd enough to guess that shame was not the only emotion which her daughter-in-law felt. She dreaded, above all things, any false relationships in her family and felt that even this comparatively trivial thing was ground for sufficient friction between them to make their separation advisable. She thought of the matter during the following day, and, in the evening, when they were together alone, she spoke to her husband.

"I think," she said, "that Harold and Asenath ought to have a house of their own."

"Why? They seem perfectly contented here, and it's fine to have them."

"There are several reasons. In the first place, as a general rule, two families should not live together. There must be some friction, and, in the second, Asenath is entitled to be mistress of her own household. Here she has to be second fiddle."

"That disposes of the general principles. Now tell me just what's the matter."

"To be perfectly frank, our daughter-in-law, while she is most fastidious about every item of her toilet and dress, is somewhat slovenly as a housekeeper. Her rooms are very untidy. In fact, they're not strictly clean."

"Have you spoken about it to her?"

"Once. And I'll not do it again."

"Why not? She's young enough to be taught, isn't she?"

"Yes, quite young enough. But not by me. I want

her affection. I don't want to come in between her and Harold and I certainly don't want her to come between him and me. When she's in her own house, she can work out her own salvation. Here there would surely be friction."

"Is that all?"

"No. I'm afraid that she's rather spoiled in one respect. She has been used to having her mother wait on her and she's quite ready to have me do the same. If we're together and I want something and announce that I'm going to get it, she's always quite willing to let me, she never offers to put herself out. It's quite thoughtless, I suppose, and she's only a child, but I'm afraid that she'll require her own experience to bring out the best in her. Nobody can do it for her."

"I see. Harold's salary isn't much, but I guess they could manage."

"Couldn't we help them?"

"Yes, when they start we can make them a substantial present."

"Will you speak to Harold about it? Not too soon. In a week or two."

"Yes. You don't want it to come too suddenly."

About ten days later, Mr. Larned came to Harold one evening and told him that they had been considering making him a suitable wedding present ever since his marriage but had not been able to decide until that day.

"We've come to the conclusion that you and Asenath

ought to set up for yourselves, and we're going to start you right by giving you five thousand dollars. With that, you can own a respectable equity in a nice little house and still have enough to furnish it. We think that it is only fair for you to have your own place, fair for both of you."

"But you're far too generous," cried Harold. "That's a young fortune."

"How could we be too generous to you, my dear boy? Some day everything we have will be yours."

"Oh! I know that, but that's a long way off."

"It will be hard at first not to have you here. I'll miss you tremendously. You won't mind having me for a constant visitor?"

All Harold could do was to grasp his father's hand in mute thanks. Any phrase would have sounded empty to him. He looked his father in the eye and saw tears there, tears of affectionate emotion.

"I'll run and tell Asenath," said Harold, and off he went.

Asenath was wild with excitement. She did not suspect for a moment the real reason behind the gift. Indeed she had almost forgotten that she had ever said she wanted a house of her own. At any rate, she did not connect this proposition with its actual cause.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BY the middle of February, Harold and Asenath were settled in their new house and both of them were convinced that no human habitation could compare with it in any way. And it was a pretty little suburban house, with just a bit of garden space on all sides, which they promised themselves they would cultivate as soon as Spring came. The inside of the house was even prettier than the outside. Asenath's first attempt at house decorating and furnishing was voted most successful by everyone, particularly her husband. In no way had Asenath ever shown so much sense of the appropriate. The result was striking in its simplicity, in the delicacy of its coloring, in its avoidance of the unnecessary. Asenath was quite ingenuous in her own admiration of it and was particularly proud of her ownership of an upright piano, a present from Harold. She expected to take lessons in the fall, but she did not actually begin for several years.

It seemed to Harold that he was now really married for the first time. While they had been living with his parents, it was only a variation, however striking a one, from his previous mode of life. But this was distinct. Their life had a complete entity of its own. He was delighted, happier than ever. He even went so far as to admire all of Asenath's cooking, which, to tell the

truth, represented progress rather than achievement. She was learning, however, and her heart was in it, because it was for Harold. His approval was the one reward which counted.

In the evening, after their simple dinner, they washed the dishes, put them away, made all the arrangements for their breakfast, and then discussed how they would spend the evening. These discussions almost invariably ended in their determining to spend it at home. Generally Harold would read to her, explaining as he went along, as he thought it necessary, or just because something in the narrative offered him a suggestion upon which he wished to expatiate.

Sometimes they would bundle up and go for a long walk. It was an unusually cold winter and they both enjoyed the clear, sparkling nights under the starry sky. They would return from these tramps exhilarated, exuberant, sensing the joy of living to the full.

At rare intervals they went to the theatre or to a concert. One evening a week they went to Harold's parents' house for dinner. Sunday they invariably dined there.

Harold was so much taken up with his home life, he was so happy under his own rooftree, that he gave up all of his former evening work. Neither of them had any desire to go out among the people they knew, their own company was sufficient. Once or twice a week Asenath went to see her mother. Her father still maintained his stand against her.

One evening Harold found last night's cigar stumps still on the ash tray. He said nothing, but emptied it himself. The next evening the same thing occurred, and then he began to notice many little things here and there, accumulations of dust, disorderly closets, carelessness in the management of the refrigerator.

It came to him with somewhat of a shock that Asenath was, to put it mildly, not punctilious in the matter of household cleanliness and order. It was something which he had simply taken for granted. All of his life he had known nothing of housekeeping in his mother's house, things always seemed to be as they should be without anyone's paying any particular attention to it. In a vague way, he knew that someone had to see that things were done, but that was all.

However, this was different. He did not like to find fault, but he felt that it would be unfair not to be perfectly frank. So, one evening, after they had finished drying the dishes they had just washed, he was about to begin putting them away when Asenath, who wanted to go out walking, said:

"Oh! Just leave them. I'll put them away in the morning."

"No, let's put them away now," he answered.

"All right," she agreed. Anything that Harold wanted was exactly the right thing.

After they had finished, they went out. After a short silence, Harold began:

"Asenath, I want you to promise that you'll take what I am going to say in good part, and not let it annoy you."

"What is it?" she queried.

"I'll tell you in a minute, but first I want to make sure that I am not finding fault or complaining. I simply want to tell you my idea of something and then we can talk it over quietly."

"Please, Harold, tell me what it is." Asenath was becoming somewhat apprehensive.

"Well, I'd like you to be a little more particular about some things in the house. I don't think you noticed that, for the last three days, I have emptied my ash tray every evening myself. And then—" he went on to mention several of the lapses which had come to his notice.

When he had finished, he waited for an answer. He hoped that she would not be angry. And she was not, except for anger with herself, a sense of shame. As she did not answer, he went on in the same considerate tone which had marked his complaint.

"If there's a little too much work for you, I'll be glad to help. We can talk it over and decide just how we'll arrange things."

"Oh! Harold," she said, "I've got lots of time. I'm just a plain—I might as well say it—a plain 'slob' and lazy. I'm awfully ashamed, but you'll never have a chance to find fault with me again for that."

Her contrition was so open that Harold was somewhat remorseful. He wanted to make it easy for her and said:

"Oh, I guess I'm too particular anyway. It wasn't much after all."

"No; I'm just a 'slob.' I could walk by that ash tray a million times and I'd never see that it was dirty until I was expecting company. But I'm going to reform, you'll see."

And she did. For Harold anything was easy, nothing was a trouble. She cleaned her house, not for the sake of cleanliness, but to please him. And he was pleased, even though complete candor on his part might have compelled the admission that household order was not Asenath's forte.

Their baby was expected about the middle of September and, as a consequence, they looked forward to spending the entire summer at home. Before this promise was held out to them, they had intended to make a trip to a number of summer resorts during Harold's vacation.

But now, everything they thought of or planned had to take into account this wonderful child that was to be born to them. Asenath was sure it would be a boy, although Harold told her that she must not make up her mind finally until she was sure which she wanted.

"But I know what I want," she said, quite oblivious of his joke. "I want a boy."

"I suppose if it should happen to be a girl you'd return it, wouldn't you?"

"No, I couldn't do that, of course, but it *must* be a boy."

"All right," he said, still teasing, "have it your *own* way."

One evening Harold brought home a book on some sociological subject which had been given to him with a strong recommendation. At the time, he was reading a story to Asenath in which she was much interested. After their dinner they went into the library, as they called it, and Asenath got out some part of the layette on which she was engaged and made ready to sew, expecting Harold to read to her as usual. This evening, however, he was anxious to read the book he had brought and he asked if she would mind if he read that instead of the story. Asenath complied immediately.

So he began reading aloud. He was much interested and did not notice that she was not taking in the meaning of what she heard. Presently, at some fine point made by the writer, he said:

"That's great, isn't it?"

"What?" she asked.

"That point about—," and then he went on to give his view of what he had just read.

"I don't understand it," said Asenath.

He tried to explain it simply so that she would be able to comprehend it, but it was of no use. She had

neither the knowledge nor the mentality necessary. So he said kindly, "Well, I guess it's a subject that you wouldn't find very interesting anyway. Let's get back to the book we were reading last evening. You like that, don't you?"

"Yes, but you want to read this new book. You just go on and read it to yourself and I'll sit here and sew."

Harold did not require coaxing and went on with his book. Once or twice Asenath asked him a question, which he answered in a few words, and then went back to his reading. She was quite content. She was with him and that was enough.

But the following evening he again read alone while she sewed and the next evening which they spent at home passed in the same way. In a couple of weeks he had practically given up reading to her and insensibly she lost what small habit of reading she had formed under his encouragement.

It was perfectly natural. Although she had enjoyed most of her reading, it had been an artificially stimulated taste and owed more to his interest in it than her own. Besides, she was busy with her sewing in all of her spare time and the habit of reading dropped from her without her perceiving it.

But Harold, released from going through books of a kind which he had long outgrown, followed his own bent and kept himself occupied with literature for which she had neither taste nor equipment.

During the hot summer evenings when there was little to do except to sit on the porch or to take an occasional walk, Harold sometimes found the time pass rather slowly. Their neighbors, with some of whom they were on a friendly footing, rather bored him. They were mostly dull, unimaginative people, with no thoughts beyond the day's work and their petty amusements: sports, cards, dancing and all sorts of pastimes which called for neither knowledge nor good taste.

He began to miss his teaching, but he could not think of leaving Asenath alone in her present condition. He was as much in love with her as ever, really more so, in spite of the fact that the more elemental quality of her attraction for him was tempered both by habituation and the sense of responsibility which the coming event imposed. He enjoyed her companionship now more than ever because there was in it a sense of the established, the solid, which had been built upon her proven devotion. The sight of her upon his return from work always produced in him a deep sense of thankfulness.

But Harold's was a complex nature. His mind was far too active, his interests too many and too varied to permit him to feel contented with affection only. He required mental stimulation. Rest for him was a change of occupation, not mere quietude.

Harold was not what might be called a great reader.

He was fond of books and got much out of them. But he was neither a bookworm nor a student. His energy was discharged in action. It was necessary for him to be doing something. Having given up all of his teaching and his active participation in the scientific societies of which he was a member, he was practically reduced to reading for the pleasures of the mind.

He was by no means discontented. On the contrary, he was very happy and Asenath had not the remotest suspicion that there had been any change in him. In fact, there had been none; it was the reassertion of his ordinary self that caused mere dalliance to cloy on him. He jested with her as always; he was actively interested in everything she had to tell him; he enjoyed watching the development of her ideas of life as her horizon widened.

In August they decided that they required the services of a maid. "They" meant Harold, who had been prompted by his mother. Mrs. Larned arranged the matter with Asenath, but did it so tactfully that the young woman felt that she had done it herself.

Asenath felt very important in having a maid. At first, she was somewhat diffident in the presence of her servant, who, by the way, was several years older than her mistress. But Asenath was an apt pupil in all matters of social usage and soon learned to maintain the proper relation. She was alone with her for many hours of the day and relied upon her to a great extent for

company. The maid was a very agreeable, sensible person, quite wise enough to recognize that she had an excellent position. With the girl to do the work, Asenath became more scrupulous in carrying out what she held to be Harold's ideas of household order.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE baby was born at about the expected time and was a fine, healthy boy. Everybody but Asenath was surprised that her expectation had been realized. Asenath, however, took the sex of the child as a matter of course. Everything connected with the birth of the child went as smoothly as possible, and, in the prescribed time, Asenath reappeared on the first floor, anxious for the moment at which the nurse would depart, so that she might take exclusive care of her baby.

She had never imagined that she could be so interested in any child, even her own. As to that, until she knew that she was actually to bear a child, she never had thought about herself as a mother. But now, only Harold could hope to compete in her affection with "Baby," as they called him.

Asenath wanted to call the baby by his father's name, but Harold objected. He claimed to have a prejudice against the "Jr." Actually, he did not like the name of Harold, although he had no reason to offer for his dislike. His refusal left the matter undecided, because, when Asenath asked him to propose some other name, he answered:

"He's your child. You name him."

Up to that time they had never discussed the matter. Harold had not thought of it and Asenath had taken

it for granted that the child would bear its father's name.

When Harold came home on the evening of the nurse's departure, Asenath called to him quietly from the head of the stair to come up, but to be careful to make no noise.

He ran up lightly and followed Asenath, who, with her finger on her lips, led the way into their bedroom and pointed to the cradle where the baby lay sleeping. As Harold stood there, regarding his child with considerable emotion, Asenath came to him and, putting her arms around his neck, kissed him. Never before had he felt his marriage so deeply. He was pervaded by a sense of great content, of established peace with himself and the world, quite in contrast to the excitement in which he saw Asenath and the baby shortly after he was born.

At first, the house had seemed to belong to outsiders. The nurse presided and gave everyone orders. It had seemed to him that even the maid held a position in the household superior to his. Afterwards things gradually approached the normal without quite reaching it. But now, the nurse was gone and it was again their own home.

After dinner that evening they were sitting together in their library, Asenath engaged in some sewing and Harold with a book open before him, which, however, he was not reading. From time to time, he made some remark which Asenath answered, but their conversation

was not continuous. Asenath had something on her mind and, presently, it appeared.

"Dearie," she said, "I've been thinking."

"Thinking of what?" he asked.

"I've been wondering if you would be willing to have Baby christened in our church."

Harold knew what she meant but professed ignorance.

"I didn't know we had any church. You surely don't mean the Unitarian Church."

"Don't be simple. I mean our old church, the Second Presbyterian."

"Well, that's a pretty good church. I don't mind."

"Do you object to the name Thomas for a boy?"

Harold saw her point immediately but did not let her see it.

He answered:

"Thomas is a good name. I don't object to it. But why Thomas?"

"I thought," said Asenath with some hesitation, "that it might be a good thing, if you didn't mind, to call Baby after my father and have him baptized at our church. Maybe he'd feel different to me."

"I didn't think you cared," said Harold, quite seriously.

"I didn't think I did either," she answered, "but I do. I want him to be friendly with us. I don't want to see him often, but I'd like to feel that he wasn't angry with me. You understand, don't you?"

"Surely," he answered. "We'll call him Thomas McBride Larned. T. M. Larned. That isn't a poor-sounding name. Of course, he'll be Tom or Tommy to everybody, but that's as good as Hal and much better than Harold. Do you really think that'll win your father over?"

"I'm sure it will. I was asking my mother about it today. She was here. She thinks Baby's getting prettier every day. She thinks he's the image of you."

"That makes about twenty that think he looks like me against about ten that pronounce him the image of you."

"He *does* look like you. He don't look one bit like me. He's got your eyes for one thing."

And so on. It was a never-ending topic.

It required only the news of the decision to name the baby for him to bring McBride to visit Asenath. His determination to have nothing to do with her had cost him much regret. She was his daughter, after all, and the family spirit was strong in all of them. It was a queer kind of affection, one that offered so little of the customary manifestation that it was difficult to recognize. This, however, has been mentioned before and there is no need to revert to it except to call attention to the fact that McBride's pride was even stronger. Having stated that he would have no more to do with Asenath, he was bound to hold to his determination until some unusual propitiation was offered. And what was now

offered fully met the requirements. Not only was the baby to bear his full name but it was to be christened in his church.

McBride came the very next evening, accompanied by his wife. She was perfectly happy in the reconciliation. She could now come to see Asenath as often as she wished and she could meet Harold's parents. To her it was a most brilliant prospect.

Harold met his parents-in-law as though there had never been anything but perfect good will between them. He was most affable. McBride was not embarrassed, but appeared to be so. He was a stiff-necked individual, and, on this occasion, was so particular not to be unfriendly that his manner was almost brusque.

McBride had to content himself with a view of his grandson in sleep. He pronounced him a fine baby and remarked a resemblance to his own father, by the way, the ancient with the chin beard and shaven upper lip whose portrait was one of the principal adornments of the McBride parlor.

After the baby had been viewed, they all went into the library and a somewhat desultory general conversation followed. McBride addressed all of his remarks to Harold, following his usual custom of ignoring the ladies of his family.

The only matter of importance which they discussed was the christening. It was arranged to take place in January, which was the month in which the next com-

munion service would occur. It was also arranged that Harold and Asenath were to eat dinner at McBrides' house on that day in order further to solemnize the importance of the event.

When these details were all settled, McBride was ready to go. For once, however, his wife was not ready with instant obedience. She was enjoying herself in the, to her, elegant surroundings of Asenath's home and wished to prolong the pleasure. It was not quite half-past eight, and, calling McBride's attention to this fact, she asked him to wait a little longer. He consented, whereupon she and Asenath promptly disappeared with the design of inspecting the layette.

The half-hour of their absence was a very long period for both men. They had nothing whatever in common which they could discuss, and, as McBride had no skill in making conversation, the burden of providing topics fell upon Harold. McBride's wonted taciturnity made this difficult, for he limited his share of the conversation to monosyllables which immediately disposed of every subject that was offered and, consequently, Harold's invention was put to a severe test.

At last the women returned and the visit was over. Harold saw them leave with great thankfulness and resolved inwardly that he would devote himself in future to avoiding his father-in-law. He did not announce his determination to Asenath, for her pleasure in the visit was unmistakable.

Thomas McBride Larned went through the first four months of his sojourn upon earth with the customary joys and trials of a perfectly healthy baby, and, at the end of this time, attended his own baptism with serenity if not enthusiasm. Harold was bored and amused by the whole proceeding.

Not so Asenath, however. For her it was immensely important and most impressive. There was not a spark of real religious feeling in her, but she enjoyed the social distinction which she felt the event brought her. Here, in the church in which she had been a regular communicant, where she was known by everyone, her marriage to a man of fine family of established position was recognized, and the consummation of this marriage, her baby, was formally received. It was a rare triumph for her, the finest she had ever known. She was fully cognizant of the interest of the majority of the congregation in her and her family and she found it altogether delightful.

Particularly did she enjoy meeting Susan. That young woman was on the lookout for her, scenting a possible social opportunity. She greeted Asenath with an effusion which was in no way overdone. Really, she was very glad to see her, and, during their short talk, an invitation to visit Asenath was the most natural thing in the world. Asenath was much flattered by Susan's obvious admiration and was glad that she was to be one of their dinner party.

The dinner at McBrides' was, in her eyes, a fitting

end to the joyful event. She helped her mother and Susan both in the service of the meal and the subsequent clearing up. Mrs. McBride protested, but feebly. As for Asenath, it was a rare pleasure to renew, as a pleasant task, what compulsion had formerly made an onerous duty.

The visit came to an end early in the afternoon and Harold and Asenath returned to their own home with great satisfaction. Harold's was due to the fact that it was all over, and Asenath's to the formal resumption of her place in her own family.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A FEW days later Harold chanced to meet one of the teachers in the night school with which he had formerly been connected. In their short talk, the proposition of Harold's renewing the work he had given up a year ago was broached and was received not unfavorably. In fact, he had several times found himself wishing to return to this work and had considered discussing the matter with Asenath. He was conscious of unrest, and, although they now quite frequently went out in the evenings to the theatre, or to the houses of some of their acquaintances, he was dissatisfied. What passed for social pleasure with most people bored him excessively. Card parties he would have none of, and dancing and small talk failed to give him any enjoyment. There was little offered in the theatres which he found worth either the time or the money it cost.

There was no real conversation between him and Asenath. She had no taste for and was utterly ignorant of the subjects which interested him and they were reduced to discussing the unimportant details of their household, their baby and the comparatively few people with whom they were both acquainted. When they spent an evening together he read some book

interesting to himself only, while she sewed or, occasionally, read some story which caught her fancy.

She was perfectly contented. She had no taste for the subjects which held his attention and was quite satisfied merely to be with him, to feel his presence. No suspicion entered her mind that he found her less interesting than before their marriage. A little reasoning would have brought it quickly before her, but Asenath, as has been frequently demonstrated, was not introspective. The fact that, formerly, Harold read aloud for her benefit was one thing, and that he now read almost invariably for his own was another. There was no particular reason for her to join them and to consider their interrelation, as long as he was there with her, as long as he evinced affection for her and appeared to be interested in what she had to say to him. She had had great pleasure in his reading aloud, but, if he found more enjoyment in reading to himself, that was sufficient. She accepted it without thought. It was right and she was satisfied because it was his wish.

Harold had not discussed with Asenath his desire to resume his teaching when he was first conscious of it because of the baby's coming. He felt that it was out of the question for him to consider leaving Asenath alone. But, as they resumed their occasional going out in the evening, it seemed to him that the subject might be broached. However, he had not done so, held back by some sentiment which defied his own analysis.

But, on the evening of this day, he spoke to Asenath about the matter. He told her of his meeting and dwelt particularly on the great need there was for teachers and the pressing demand which had been made on him. He finished by saying that he thought he ought to do the work, but did not dwell upon his own keen desire for it.

"Are you going to do it?" she asked.

"I think I will. That is, if you're satisfied."

"I don't like to have you away two evenings in the week, but if you think it's your duty, I'm willing."

"I thought you'd feel that way about it. It won't be a terribly long separation anyway, for I'll be home for dinner and back again by ten-thirty."

"It'll seem long to me," said Asenath.

He began the work in the early part of February. He attacked it with the zest of a hungry man. The work was most delightful to him, for he loved to teach. It was the function for which he was best fitted. His contentment, due to his having this outlet for his energy, was so great that it showed itself in an increased display of affection for Asenath. He was as lively as the proverbial cricket; he jested with her and indulged in many of the verbal extravagances which delighted her. He was thoroughly happy.

Asenath did not connect his renewed exuberance with the resumption of his teaching. She merely accepted it and was pleased. She made no comparisons.

However, she found Monday and Thursday evenings very long and tedious. She was quite accustomed to his being away for ten hours during the day. She had her work to do, there was the baby to care for, she exchanged visits with her mother and some of her acquaintances. But the evening was the crown of the whole day. That was the time she spent with Harold. She was contended, happy all day long, but in the evening, from the moment that she heard his key in the lock of the front door, she was conscious of more than contentment. It might almost be called exaltation.

Susan came to visit her one evening shortly after the christening. They had made no engagement, she merely dropped in. It happened that Harold and Asenath were going out this evening. However, Susan had come very early, about half-past seven, and they did not intend leaving home until after eight. When she left, it was with the promise to come the following Monday evening for dinner, after which, as they put it, she and Asenath would spend the evening "talking over old times." Harold found Susan rather amusing; she was vivacious, used slang with great effect because it was her natural means of expression, and was possessed of a native shrewdness which enabled her to judge the people with whom she came into contact with great accuracy.

Susan was much impressed by the dinner. It was the first time in her life that she had seen service like this

and it seemed to her wonderfully elegant. Although she was blessed with a good appetite, she ate very little, because the novelty of the experience excited her. She had to watch Asenath to learn what to do and, besides, she had to keep up her end of the conversation with Harold, who found her an admirable contender and was therefore spurred on to outdo her in friendly raillery.

After he had left, Asenath and Susan had a long talk largely made up of questions put by Susan as to Asenath's life during the last year. Susan also had a great deal to tell on her own account. Finally she asked Asenath how she and Harold spent their evenings.

"We usually stay at home," said Asenath. "Harold reads and I sew, and we talk."

"Do you do that every night?"

"Oh! no. We go out now and then. We used to, anyway, before Harold began to teach in the night school. Now we don't go out at all except to his folks' house."

"Don't you find it awful dull?"

"Why! No. As long as Harold's home, I'm perfectly satisfied."

"I should think you'd get the willies always sticking at home. Don't you ever want to go out?"

"I do go out in the daytime when I want to."

"Oh! I don't mean that. Don't you ever want to go to a show or a dance?"

"I wouldn't mind going, if Harold wanted to go, but he doesn't get any fun out of going to things like that, so I don't care."

"See here, Queenie, you're just about twenty, ain't you? How many times do you think you're going to live? Only once. You'll be young only once and the time to have your fun is now, when the going's good. It'll be time to settle down when you're old."

"I'm perfectly satisfied," answered Asenath. And she meant it.

"You must be just crazy about him."

"I am. He's just wonderful. He don't have to say one word to me. All I want is just to have him here with me. Then nothing else counts."

"Do you think he feels that way about you?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"It's different with a man, I guess," said Susan, after a little thought. "If he felt like you do, I guess he wouldn't be willing to go off twice a week to that school of his."

This was a new idea for Asenath, something that hadn't occurred to her. It gave her a sense of injury, a feeling that perhaps her great love for Harold was not fully reciprocated. She said nothing, but gazed meditatively into the fire which was slowly dying on the hearth. After a pause, Susan broke the silence.

"What time does he usually come home?" she asked.

"About half-past ten. He'll be in any minute now."

They went on with their talk, but no longer with the same briskness. The year and more which had passed without their meeting had interposed a barrier between them. Each had led her own life in widely removed spheres and there was not much with which to bridge the gap. They could talk of their experiences during the separation, but, in both cases, it was news from a foreign country, of no immediate concern to the other.

At last, Harold came in. He was surprised to find Susan still there, and somewhat annoyed because he thought he might have to take her home. He did not show his annoyance, however, and made the offer with the appearance of perfect good faith. Susan assured him that she did not mind going home alone, that she was used to it and that, further, the idea of taking him out on so useless an errand on a cold night like this would make her very uncomfortable and, besides, would go far to prevent her coming again in the evening.

Thus reassured, Harold let her go, and was so much relieved that he became even more cheerful than usual and was so talkative that he failed to notice a certain amount of preoccupation on Asenath's part occasioned by the thought that Susan had put into her head.

A few weeks later Harold came home one evening and told Asenath that he had met Wallace Graham that day at lunch and that Wallace had told him that they ought to see more of each other. Wallace and Harold had been friends for many years, quite intimate, in

fact, until they were both married. At this particular meeting, both of them much hurried, they had not opportunity to say half of the things they wished to tell each other. As they left, Wallace said that it was a shame that they met so seldom. There was no need for it, and thereupon they arranged that they and their wives were to dine with each other every two weeks. The first dinner was to be Grahams' on the following Saturday evening.

"Just plain meals. No company fussing," said Harold to Asenath. "No programme, no arrangements in advance. If we want to go anywhere we'll go and if we want to stay home, why, we'll stay home."

Asenath assented, but she was not pleased. She felt that Louise Graham looked down upon her and upon that reason Asenath justified her dislike. But Harold wanted to go and that was sufficient.

CHAPTER XXXIX

NOR was Louise Graham pleased when Wallace announced the arrangement he had made with Harold. She had always liked Harold and would have been happy if she could have aroused some real interest in him. But this she had never been able to do. Asenath she did not like. In the first place, Asenath had succeeded where she had failed, and, in the second, she looked upon her as an upstart, entirely out of her class in her present environment.

When Wallace told her that the two couples were to meet every two weeks, beginning the Saturday immediately following, she contented herself by saying:

"You won't keep it up long."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because you're both married. You and Hal have always been good friends and probably always would have been. But that won't make your wives friends, and you may be sure, in this case, that that silly little wife of Hal's won't let him come here without a struggle. She doesn't like me, you know."

"Well, do you like her?"

"I'm utterly indifferent with regard to her. I shall never be able to explain how a superior fellow like Hal, much above the average, could ever bring himself to marry such a person."

"They say 'love is blind'."

"It must be."

The dinner went off very smoothly. Louise had determined to do her best not to spoil the affair and was most particular in her behavior towards Asenath. She induced her to talk about the baby, about matters of the household, got her to tell her what plays she had seen, what books she had read and avoided altogether any phase of these subjects which might bring Asenath's ignorance into relief.

Although it was not meant unkindly, Asenath inwardly resented being talked down to. She felt humiliated and was angry, although she showed it neither in voice nor manner. Louise was quite delighted with herself. She was convinced that she had completely hidden her dislike. All through the dinner she kept Asenath in the conversation, and, at the same time, managed to keep the men in too.

When they arose from the table, Louise began a conversation with Harold alone, leaving Wallace and Asenath to themselves. Presently she took Harold into another room to show him some picture which she had recently bought. He found it most interesting, so much so that it opened a discussion between them which lasted nearly half an hour. Louise talked extremely well, she knew the subject and so did he. There was much which they held in common. She saw that he was interested and fairly outdid herself in the liveliness of her ideas and

the brilliancy of her expression. As she was speaking, Harold was suddenly struck by the great contrast between her and Asenath. What a fine companion she must be for a man of intellectual tastes. Harold, it may be observed, was in no doubt whatever as to his inclusion in that category. It was stimulating to be with her. He wondered whether Wallace really appreciated her at her true value. He thought of these things in an under story of his mind while the main floor, so to speak, was occupied by what she said. She was brilliant, there was no doubt, and Asenath was, well—she was lovely of course, but—she surely had no semblance of a mind like this. Ah! it was a pity.

When she had finished with a smile which told him that she was thoroughly aware that she had talked well, he said:

"You certainly put that very clearly."

"Do you think so?" she asked with pleasure.

"I certainly do. I've never heard even you talk so well."

"Perhaps I was inspired by my companion."

"You're very modest."

"No, I'm not. It makes a big difference whom one has for a listener."

"I suppose this then is nothing to what you say to Wallace."

"Oh! Wallace!" she said with a pout.

"What's the matter with him?"

"I suppose nothing's the matter, but I can't talk to him about things like that."

"Why not?"

"He isn't interested in the first place and, in the second, Oh! what's the use of talking about him? But I can talk to you, I always could. There seems to be a sympathy, an understanding between us that makes me sure of myself."

"Yes, I guess there is. We always did have great talks, didn't we?" He said this musingly. He was wondering how it was that she had never strongly attracted him. As he remembered their talks of old, it appeared that they had always indulged in a battle of wits, they were always at swords' length. He wondered why.

"Didn't we?" she answered, unconsciously repeating his phrase. "Oh! Hal, I am very hungry for sympathy nowadays." She laid her hand on his arm. The gesture spoke volumes. He did nothing to show it, but he was greatly surprised. Was this woman, the wife of his best friend, flirting with him? He had no doubt of it, nor had he any doubt of his total lack of desire to meet her on that ground. She had never appealed to him except as a brilliant intellect. He had never been drawn to her, she had never been able to arouse any interest in him based on the difference in sex.

"You surprise me," he said. He could not have explained why he was willing to go on with this talk. Perhaps it was mere curiosity to see how far she would go.

"Why do you find it surprising?" she asked, with an appearance of great earnestness, "surely you know how matter-of-fact Wallace is."

"I didn't think he would be with you." Harold really had never thought about it at all.

"Oh! Don't let's talk about him. He's had his chance and he hasn't taken advantage of it." She spoke rather bitterly.

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked. There was a slight emphasis on the word "me."

"I don't know," she answered, "I'm sure I didn't mean to when I began. But, Hal," she said, "you *do* understand me, don't you?"

"I suppose so," he replied, wondering whether she meant that he sympathized with her or merely justified her discussion of the subject with him.

"I'm sure you do," she went on. "I hope nothing will ever break into our friendship. It's very sweet to me."

The words were harmless enough, but the manner was significant. He knew definitely that she was inviting him into a flirtation. Her hand was still on his arm. She looked anxiously into his eyes, seeking some indication of awakened interest.

But now he merely despised her. Without appearing to notice her hand lying on his arm, he moved away, saying:

"I suppose we'd better find out what the others are up to."

They found Wallace and Asenath turning the pages

of an illustrated book. Wallace was making humorous comments, apparently for his own benefit solely, for Asenath wore a most serious expression. Harold was conscious that something was wrong, he could not imagine what, but he knew that something had displeased her. Of that he was sure.

The rest of the evening, short as it was, was entirely unsuccessful and all of them were glad when it was late enough for the Larneds to go without proclaiming that the affair had been a dismal failure.

Harold and Asenath walked to the corner at which they were to take the car. Neither of them uttered a word. He was out of sorts. All of his and Wallace's hopes for the success of these meetings were blasted. It was not necessary to discuss the matter, all of them knew it. He was particularly angry with Louise. What right had she to suppose that he was open to a flirtation with her? It was perfectly ridiculous in her and an insult to him as well, leaving Wallace out of consideration. And suddenly there came into his memory some chance remark that Wallace had made to him the day they had met which took on a new meaning now. There was no doubt of it, Louise and Wallace were not satisfied with their marriage. Each of them possessed apparently every qualification. Any one would have said they were perfectly suited to each other. But the fact was that they were not.

As he thought these things, he was conscious that

Asenath was unusually silent. Then he remembered her expression as she sat by Wallace looking at the book as he and Louise came into the room.

"What was the matter with you this evening?" he asked. "You weren't paying any attention to Wallace at all, at least when I came into the room."

"Nothing," said Asenath and walked on silently.

Harold waited a few minutes and then returned to the attack.

"There *was* something," he said. "I could see by your expression that you were annoyed. What was it?"

"Nothing," repeated Asenath.

"Don't go on saying 'nothing,' I know something happened. Did Wallace say anything to displease you?"

"No." she answered. "He was very nice."

"Well, what was it then?" Harold's annoyance was rapidly becoming anger and it was with difficulty that he kept his voice down to its normal pitch.

"It was nothing, I tell you," said Asenath. Her voice was decidedly shaky as she added, "Please don't talk about it any more."

"But I want to know— There's our car. Run for it."

They ran and caught the car. It was crowded and they were compelled to stand. Conversation was practically impossible. It was but a short ride, although long enough for Harold's anger to subside considerably. As they walked towards their house, he began again, but in a much quieter tone:

"Won't you please tell me, Asenath, what was wrong?"

"Please don't ask me, Harold. I feel miserable enough without talking. Please."

She walked on in silence. So did he, but he was again becoming angry, this time as a result of what he considered her obstinacy.

They entered the house and Asenath immediately went upstairs. She looked in at the baby, found him sleeping quietly and then went into her dressing room and closed the door, a thing which she had never done before.

Harold went into the library and picked up a book in the hope of regaining his composure. Try as he would, he could not fasten his attention on the words before him, and, after several attempts, gave it up and went upstairs. Asenath was not visible. He waited for her to appear, but as she did not do so, he undressed slowly and got into his bed without extinguishing the light.

He lay there for about ten minutes awaiting her, but she did not come. He found himself feeling annoyed at what he was ready to call a silly, childish obstinacy, but his annoyance at her behavior was not an unmixed emotion. He was sorry for her. He knew that something much out of the ordinary must have occurred to have so thoroughly ruffled her usual serenity. As the minutes passed and she did not come, he was tempted to go to sleep or, at least, to feign sleep and await the morning for an explanation. But he could not do it. His conscience

was not perfectly at ease. He should not have remained so long with Louise. He had not been perfectly frank about the matter of the night school. But such thoughts were silly; what had they to do with her treating him in this way?

He got out of bed and walked over to the door of Asenath's dressing room, intending to enter to see what was keeping her. But he did not open the door. He knocked and received no answer. Then he asked if he might come in and, again, there was no answer.

He opened the door gently and peered in. Asenath was in her chair in front of her dressing table with her head buried in her arms. She was weeping quietly, her body shaking with her sobs. For a moment Harold stood by the door, awaiting some sign from her which would indicate that she was aware of his presence. But none came. At last he called to her quietly:

"Asenath."

There was still no answer, unless a new access of tears might be so described. Harold was becoming more impatient. He went over to her and put his arm on her shoulder.

"Asenath," he said. "What on earth is the matter with you?"

And still no answer. He felt his anger rising beyond control.

"Asenath," he cried, "get up from there and go to bed."

She got up and, with her face still hidden, walked

out of the dressing room into the bedroom and got into her bed. Harold extinguished the light and followed her into the bedroom. Then he seated himself on a chair beside her bed and spoke to her.

"Asenath, I insist that you tell me immediately what you are crying about. I don't know what to make of you. Ever since we left Wallace's you have been moping and now you are crying as though some dreadful misfortune had befallen you, and, when I speak to you, you won't answer."

This time Asenath found her voice.

"Oh! I wish I was dead," she said between sobs.

"What is the matter? I insist on knowing."

"You know very well."

"I know? What are you talking about?"

"I wish you had never married me. If it wasn't for little Tommy, I'd run away from you."

"Asenath, won't you please come to your senses. You talk like an ignorant little fool."

The answer to this was a fresh outburst. In scarcely recognizable phrase, so choked with tears was she, she cried:

"That's just what's the matter. I am an ignorant little fool, and you're tired of me. You go out in the evenings to that old night school because you're tired of me—"

"Asenath!" he almost shouted. "You're beside yourself. You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. And tonight you went off with that hateful Louise Graham who's always mean to me, and stuck with her the whole evening. Oh!" She wept with redoubled energy.

Harold was outwardly calm now, although inwardly he was quite the reverse. He saw that she was excited, much more so than he had ever known her to be, and that she must be quieted.

"Listen, Asenath," he said, taking her hand and stroking it. "I don't know where you got your ideas, but they're all wrong. Will you listen to me?"

Asenath's head, which was buried face down in the pillow, nodded assent. Harold went on:

"If I had had any idea that you were displeased because I resumed my teaching, I wouldn't have done it. You remember I asked you. But it's not too late, I can stop immediately, and I will." His voice was kindness itself and its effect was seen in a material subsidence of her emotion.

"As for my being tired of you, my dear," he went on, "that's ridiculous, utterly ridiculous. And as for Louise Graham, she can—she can go to Hell for all I care." And he meant it, too.

"Come, Asenath," he said, leaning over to her and putting his arm around her neck, "you didn't mean what you said, did you?" He drew her head out of the pillow and turned her face towards him. She turned her body, and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Oh! Harold," she said. But that was all. She could go no further.

"You didn't mean what you said, did you?" he repeated. He saw that she was over the spell of weeping and that she would soon be in a normal state. He was no longer angry with her. He felt only a great tenderness, a great love for her. After all, she had not been in the wrong, it was he and he knew it. But his gentleness, his touch had done for Asenath what no amount of reasoning could have brought about. It made her feel guilty; it made her feel that he was the injured one; it made her wish to humiliate herself.

"Oh! Harold," she said at length, "can you ever forgive me?"

"Don't talk of my forgiving you," he answered; "you've done nothing wrong."

"Oh! but I have. I lost my temper, and I said dreadful things. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Don't let's talk about it any more. Let's forget all about it. Let's forget everything except that we love one another." And his lips met hers in a long, passionate kiss.

"Oh! Harold," she sighed at last, "you're so good to me."

CHAPTER XL

LONG after her regular breathing indicated that Asenath was in a sound slumber, Harold lay in his bed wide awake. He attempted to woo sleep in all of the traditional ways, but with no success. It was a most unusual occurrence. Ordinarily he was asleep almost the instant his head touched the pillow.

He could not account for it at all. It seemed so foolish, so unnecessary; it was most annoying. As his annoyance mounted, his wakefulness increased, and, presently, he found it impossible to stay in bed.

He got up softly so as not to disturb Asenath, and, putting on a pair of slippers and a bath robe, went into the library, turned on the light and took up the book he happened to be reading. But he was not interested. He could not fix his mind on the words before him. He was restless, almost as uncomfortable as he had been while in bed.

He laid the book down and walked to and fro across the room a few times. Fearing that the sound of his steps might disturb Asenath, he again sat down.

This time he made no attempt to read. Instead he pondered the events of the evening through which he had just passed. He wondered what on earth could have been responsible for Asenath's outburst. Surely

it was unlike her to find any wrong in him. He was fully aware that, with her, his will was not only law, but that, in addition, the mere fact that it had been enunciated by him made it wholly admirable. She had never said so, but the year and over which they had lived together had shown it to him more convincingly than was possible by words.

Where then was the moving cause? What had started it? He was sure that Asenath had not been nursing a grudge against him on account of his having resumed his teaching. Of course, she could not help noticing that he was now willing again to take up work which he had relinquished in order to be as much in her company as possible. But she had not shown that she resented it. On the contrary, she had made it a practice to wait up for him on each of the evenings he was away and her greeting had always been fully as affectionate as ever.

Could it have begun because Louise and he had been so long together away from Asenath and Wallace? Perhaps, but it was not likely. She had never shown any resentment at his having done the same thing with other women.

With others? Ah! that was it. And now he believed he saw it all clearly. Asenath had not wanted to renew her acquaintance with Louise. The two girls were distinctly antipathetic. She went to Grahams' house practically under protest. And then Louise's talking

down to Asenath's level, making it obvious to the two men to what ordinary, commonplace topics Asenath's conversation was restricted, had fanned the slumbering embers, and his going into another room with Louise had caused them to burst into flame.

That was it and it was silly and unreasonable. He felt as though she had done him an injury. Was he always to be thus hampered? Was it not enough that she was unable to meet him on any kind of an intellectual basis? Must he always have to reckon on her childishness?

And then he thought of their reconciliation and how it had been accomplished. They had not discussed their differences like two sensible people. They had not come together reasonably and learned their reciprocal viewpoints. No, they had come together, male and female, following not reason but instinct. He despised himself, but he also despised her.

And then he found himself angry, incapable of clear, consecutive thought. The same ideas returned constantly to his mind in a dull, stupid round.

He got up and went back to their room and into his bed. Once more he was going over the same matter, in much the same way, and then he fell asleep.

But his sleep was not his regular sound slumber by any means. He half awoke from time to time and then fell again into a restless sleep. Once during the night he heard Asenath arise and take the baby, who had

awakened, but he gave no sign and was again asleep before Asenath returned to her bed.

It was their custom to lie abed on Sunday morning until quite a late hour, but this morning Harold was wide awake by seven o'clock. Wide awake, but not rested. His perturbation of the night before was still upon him.

He determined to get up and take a walk before breakfast in order to clear his head. He arose noiselessly, made his usual morning toilet with precaution, so as not to disturb either Asenath or the baby, and by seven-thirty he let himself quietly out of the front door, having left a hastily scribbled note for Asenath, to acquaint her with what he was doing.

It was a fine, cold morning. The sun was just peeping over the horizon. A thin coating of frozen snow lay on the empty street. He walked briskly, inhaling the chill air with zest. He had not gone three blocks before he began to feel better and, by the time he had traversed six, he was himself again.

He made no effort to direct his thoughts but allowed them to come as they would. He noted little things as they came into view, things he had seen so many times before, in the preoccupation which usually controlled him, that he had never noticed them: the white shutters of a Colonial house of some pretension, the tiled roof of a house in the Spanish style. He did not think of them, they merely entered his consciousness and made him aware of his own perception.

He covered more than a mile in this way and then again his thought reverted to last night. But he was now calm. He could see things in their proper light. He could weigh and measure with justice and equity.

He had married Asenath. That much was plain. He had misjudged her. Because he enjoyed being with her, because she had shown pleasure in his presence, because, in some unaccountable way, they had been mutually attracted, he had never really made any question as to her fitness to be his wife. He had had no thought of marriage at all at the beginning. He was simply charmed by her. Even then, in view of her almost complete ignorance, he had fatuously believed that he could educate her, could bring her up to his standard. And for what? So that she might be above the people of her own intellectual plane; so that she might despise those whom, under ordinary circumstances, she would have welcomed. No; he had not thought of that, he had blindly tried to educate her for himself. He did not know it, because his wisdom, moderate as it was, would have rejected the idea; he did it because something in him wanted her and wanted her to be dressed up in the trappings of the mind which were suited to his own. He thought she had a good mind requiring only cultivation. Why? Because he wanted to think she had a good mind, because he wanted her and his pride forbade his acceptance of her without this credential. What was all of his education worth, what good were

all of his previous associations, his standards, if they were to be hoodwinked by something in him which was stronger than his judgment; which, in the most important decision that one can make in life, could set aside everything, or worse, was able to misrepresent everything which stood in its way? Was it then pure sex which had attracted him? Could it be as primitive as that? No; for that would have cast him at the feet of the first woman he met and that was certainly not his case.

No, it was finer than that. It must be, for he had met many girls, he had even been sought by them and had rather avoided them or, at least, had held them at arm's length. No, it was not mere sex, but sex as personified by Asenath. From the very beginning, from their first day in the country, that morning at the brook, she had drawn him, she had been desirable in his eyes. And then, when he had met her and learned that she was the fiancée of James Rawlings, he had had a lively sense of regret, of personal loss. With what alacrity he had seized the opportunity to visit her when he learned that her engagement had been broken. And from then on, it had been one continuous desire, ever broadening, ever deepening, until it had culminated in their sudden marriage.

And even then he had not perceived her limitations. In the greatness of his passion for her, he had been blind. It seemed as though this passion had been able

to monopolize him, to set aside the regular course of his life; to take the place, temporarily at least, of the interests which had always been his. And now these interests claimed their place and passion was relegated to its own. Now he could see Asenath as she was; beautiful, affectionate, faithful, true, but limited intellectually. She had neither the mind nor even the desire for knowledge. She had good taste, almost perfect taste, in all matters æsthetic, but, beyond the simplest abstractions, her mind would not go.

And this was to be his companion for the rest of his life. This had been his choice. But had it been his choice? Was it he that had selected her or was it something stronger, something which overruled his judgment? Instinct?

And supposing that he had used his judgment, how would he have chosen? Would it have been someone like Louise? He almost shuddered at the thought. He thought of his father and mother, of their perfect harmony, based on different but equally fine minds, on sturdy characters both, and wondered how they had chosen. Was that intelligent selection or was it merely good fortune?

But, he thought, what was the use of all of this, except as a mere matter of academic interest? The fact remained that he was married to Asenath. That was actuality. That must be faced. That must be worked out.

Not by relinquishing what was his own, such as his teaching. That was worth while, and Asenath would be sure to see that whatever sacrifice it meant to her was justified by the worthiness of the cause. He would follow his intellectual bent, but he would recognize to the best of his ability her rights as well. He would give to her what she wanted, and he would give it willingly, ungrudgingly. She should have her share and he would have his.

They had much in common after all. Intellectual pursuits were not everything. There were the arts, music, pictures, which they might share. Perhaps it was even better that he should have interests apart from hers, that his own particular activities were independent. It might be much better for her to be apart from his work. Who could tell?

After all, she was not captious, but, instead, was perfectly reasonable. He could have done much worse. He would never, if he could help it, let her see that she was not all he had expected.

A sudden feeling of hunger awakened him to the fact that it was nearly time for their breakfast. He turned about and made for the nearest car. Twenty minutes later he had reached his house. The maid was just taking in the morning newspaper.

He walked upstairs without noise, and, as he reached the landing, he saw Asenath with the baby in her arms, unconscious of his presence. Never had she

seemed so beautiful. The holy pride of the mother in her child glorified her, and, in a great wave of emotion, Harold felt the strength of his love for her newly born. She was his wife and the mother of his child. And he was humbly grateful.

THE END

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